

Oman condemns Sweden incident

The Sultanate of Oman has expressed its strong condemnation of burning a copy of the Holy Quran in Sweden by extremists. In a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry, Oman voiced its denunciation of such provocative actions that provoke Muslims' feelings and incite violence and hatred. In this context, Oman stressed the need for concerted international efforts to consolidate the values of tolerance, coexistence and respect. Oman also lays emphasis on criminalising all acts that promote the ideology of extremism and hatred or offend religions and beliefs. — ONA



P12

SWIA TEK, GAUFF CRASH OUT



P13

ABRAJ ENERGY TO OFFER 49% IN IPO ON MSX



P20

MEMORIES OF AL JABAL AL AKHDHAR'S AL DAWA CAVE



MUSCAT

APPLICATIONS FOR MAJLIS ELECTIONS

The Ministry of Interior has issued a decision defining the period of submitting applications for candidacy to the Majlis Ash'shura 10th Term Membership. The applications can be submitted between January 29 and February 16 2023, according to the decision, which also set September 3, 2023 as the deadline for withdrawing such candidacy. The ministry alerts eligible citizens to submit their applications via the elections' website (elections.om), after filling the subscribed forms available at the website and attaching all required documents. No applications for candidacy can be accepted if received after the set dates or delivered by means other than the stated website. — ONA

CLOUD SERVICES IN MUSANDAM

The Governor's Office of Musandam on Sunday signed a cooperation agreement with Oman Data Park (ODP), to utilise the company's cloud services in hosting the governorate's data centre. The move comes in line with enhancing digital transformation and keeping pace with technological development. As per the agreement, Oman Data Park will create and host the domain name and e-mail IDs for the Governorate of Musandam, where ODP will set an official electronic address for the governorate to be used by visitors and beneficiaries of electronic services. **DETAILS ON P5**



FESTIVALS TO BOOST DOMESTIC TOURISM

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism will host three festivals in various governorates of the Sultanate of Oman in the first quarter of this year. These festivals include Oman Maritime Heritage Festival, Desert Adventure Festival, Al Dakhiliyah Festival, windsurfing, sailing, and other marine events. The ministry is preparing to host a number of festivals this year to boost domestic tourism as well as the cultural heritage of the country, in addition to raising hotel occupancy even in the remote areas. The Sultanate of Oman has attracted three million tourists in 2022. **DETAILS ON P3**

Rise in value of housing assistance for needy families among citizens

MUSCAT: Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, issued Decision No 9/2023 amending Article 18 of the previous ministerial decision No 6/2011 on the value of housing assistance offered to entitled citizens. The decision reflects the ministry's concern for needy segments of society that are beneficiaries of the Social Housing Programme serving families of the disabled and social security families.

According to the decision, eligible families consisting of 2 to 3 members are entitled to RO 25,000 housing assistance to build or reconstruct a residence. This is in condition that the constructed area is not less than 140 sqm, and



in case the beneficiary contributes towards the value, the area should not be more than 250 sqm. The value of housing assistance is set at RO 30,000 for eligible families consisting of 4 or more members, provided the area of the constructed residence (to be built

or reconstructed) shall not be less than 190 sqm. In the event of a beneficiaries contributing towards the value, the area shall not be more than 300 sqm. The decision applies to all cases that have not been financially bound until its date. **TURN TO P2**

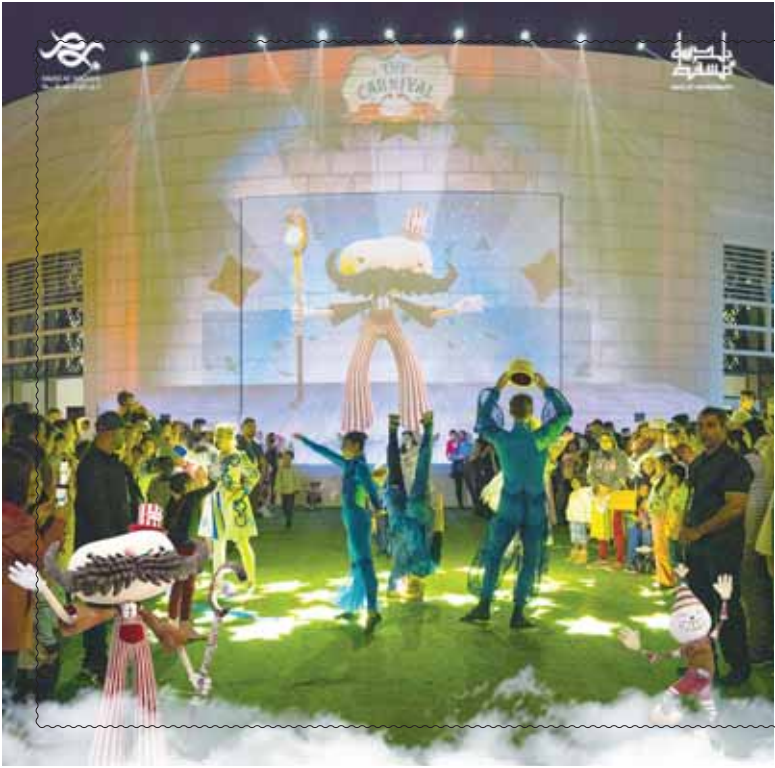
US police hunt gunman who killed 10 in shooting

MONTEREY PARK: Police in Southern California on Sunday launched a manhunt for an Asian male suspected in a mass shooting that left 10 people dead and 10 others wounded at a dance club during Lunar New Year celebrations, police said on Sunday.

The "male suspect fled the scene and remains outstanding," Los Angeles County sheriff Robert Luna told a press conference in Monterey Park. He cautioned that the description of the shooter remains preliminary,

and he gave no further identifying details. The gunman opened fire as the local community were celebrating Lunar New Year at the venue in Monterey Park, with witnesses saying he shot indiscriminately with a semi-automatic weapon.

"The Monterey Park Fire Department responded to the scene and treated the injured and pronounced 10 of the victims deceased at the scene," Captain Andrew Meyer said earlier. Five of the dead were women and five men. **SEE ALSO P7**



MUSCAT NIGHTS ATTRACTS CROWDS

A steady stream of visitors was seen at all the four venues of the Muscat Nights on Sunday. Known earlier as Muscat Festival, the footfall at Muscat Nights witnessed an increasing trend on the third day since its opening. Qurum Natural Park, Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, Oman Automobile Association Ground and Naseem Gardens are receiving people who are making most of the events aimed at visitors of all ages daily. **DETAILS ON P4**



Education ministry signs 2 pacts with Oman LNG Company

MUSCAT: In the presence of Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, signed two cooperation agreements with the Development Corporation of the Oman LNG Company.

The first agreement came to finance the initiative of a project to equip the classrooms of the integration programme with sensory integration aids for students with disabilities in the schools of South Al Sharqiyah Governorate. The second agreement came to finance the project of the National Programme to Support Emerging Innovators. The signing of the two agreements took place at the Ministry's General Diwan.

The agreements were signed on the part of the Ministry of Education, by Majid bin Said al Bahri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education, for Administrative and Financial Affairs, and on the part of Oman LNG Development Corporation, Dr Amer bin



Nasser al Matani, CEO of the Corporation.

Dr Amer bin Nasser al Matani, CEO of the Omani LNG Development Corporation, said: "The integrated classrooms project, which includes sensory integration, aims to deliver

the educational message in a modern and accessible manner to students with disabilities, and this is reflected in the quality of the services provided, and in raising their academic achievement. The National Programme aims to support

and embrace innovators, and to create an educational environment that encourages innovation, and supporting innovation is one of the most prominent elements of the corporate social responsibility strategy."

Diplomatic Affairs Under-Secy receives Bahraini official



MUSCAT: Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs, received here on Sunday Dr Mohammed Ali Bahzad, Bahrain's Under-Secretary for Consular and Administrative Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The two sides reviewed bilateral relations and means of enhancing them. They also exchanged views

on cooperation in consular and administrative affairs between the two foreign ministries.

The meeting was attended by Shaikh Ahmed bin Hashel al Maskari, Head of the GCC Department at the Foreign Ministry, Dr Juma bin Ahmed al Kaabi, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain to the Sultanate of Oman. It was also attended by officials from both sides. — ONA

■ DGICI HOLDS WORKSHOP ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING REPORTS



MUSCAT: As part of the work of the National Committee for Combating Human Trafficking, the Directorate-General of Inquiries and Criminal Investigations (DGICI) conducted a workshop for the employees in charge of receiving reports related to human trafficking crimes, on Sunday. The workshop aimed at acquainting the participants with the legal procedures required while collecting evidence and the most important data and information that should be considered when receiving human trafficking reports.

Raise in value of housing assistance for needy

FROM PAGE 1

Article (18) of the previous ministerial decision No 6/2011 had set the value of the housing assistance at a maximum of RO 20,000 and allowed the minister to raise the value of the housing assistance for those inhabiting areas with difficult terrain.

The new ministerial decision seeks to cement social ties and enhance the stability of families, besides consolidating partnership and cooperation with the private sector. The step also takes into consideration current demographic and economic developments like the high value of building materials, the value added

tax (VAT) and improving the quality of the residences.

In 2019, the number of beneficiaries of the Housing Assistance Programme stood at more than 1,000 families with a total cost of more than RO 41 million.

In 2020, the number of beneficiaries stood at 600 families to the tune of more than RO 15 million.

In 2021, the number of beneficiaries stood at 1,261 families with a total cost of more than RO 30 million.

In 2022, the number of beneficiaries stood at 1,478 families with a total cost of more than RO 35 million. — ONA

International students join Arabic course

MANAH: The Sultan Qaboos Institute for Teaching Arabic Language to Non-native Speakers received a new batch of international students, on Sunday.

The new batch comprises 26 students from the UK, Ireland, France, Poland, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Brunei Darussalam, South Korea, Iran, Kazakhstan and South Africa.

On the first day, the institute conducted an induction meeting to familiarise the students with the teaching and administrative staff and the officials supervising

the cultural programmes for the current course. The students viewed a visual display of the Sultanate of Oman and its culture, civilisation and tourism potentials. They were also familiarised with the communication programmes with the local community through trips, visits and varied activities.

The students will have a tour in the Wilayat of Manah to explore its historic landmarks. They will have a meeting with the language partners of the current course to identify the cultural and civilisational identity of the Sultanate of Oman. — ONA

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Pepping up local tourism, supporting SMEs

VINOD NAIR
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The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism on Sunday held a press conference to reveal the festivals that the ministry will organise during 2023.

Organising the festivals is aimed at stimulating local tourism, promoting the heritage, natural and tourism elements, enhancing the Sultanate of Oman's rank on the tourism map and contributing to adding value to the local community by supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and increasing the number of reservations in hotels.

Azzan bin Qasim al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism for Tourism, said that the ministry will organise the Desert Adventures Festival at Sharqiya Sands in the Governorate of North Al Sharqiyah from January 29 to February 4. This festival will include various activities and will be held in cooperation with several public and private entities.

Al Busaidy pointed out that the Desert Adventures Festival aims at revitalising winter tourism in the governorate in general, and in the Wilayat of Bidiya in particular.

This year, Al Busaidy said, the ministry will also launch



4 KEY FESTIVALS

Desert Adventures Festival
... Jan 29 to Feb 4

Omani Maritime Heritage Festival
... Feb 3 to Feb 19

Al Dakhiliyah Governorate Festival
... Feb 23 to March 4

Empty Quarter Festival
... Jan 25 to Feb 3

the first edition of the Omani Maritime Heritage Festival, from February 3 to 19, in the Wilayat of Sur in the Governorate of



South Al Sharqiyah. This festival will highlight the historical and present role of the Wilayat of Sur, as a commercial and historical hub and an area deeply related to ship building over centuries.

The Omani Maritime Heritage Festival, will include the Maritime Heritage Village, to tell the story of the maritime heritage that Sur is well-known for. It will also include an Omani Food Carnival, to host a series of interactive activities

that allow visitors to explore several renowned Omani and international dishes, with a focus on fresh local seafood.

The festival will also include a life simulation of the traditional sea voyage which embodies the historical journey of Omani ships to and from the Omani ports. Also, the simulation covers mechanism of transporting and loading goods and cargo in the past, accompanied by folk arts, Al Busaidy added.

The under-secretary elaborated that this festival will also include side events such as a windsurfing experience, a sailing experience, marine championships for juniors and professionals, a sea fishing competition, a symposium on maritime heritage and a traditional boat race.

He added that during this year, the ministry will organise the annual Festival of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate which is planned for

the period from February 23 to March 4. The event will be held in cooperation with Al Dakhiliyah Governor's Office.

The Festival of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, will include a number of cultural, heritage, entertainment and adventure events, as well as several tourism experiences that are unique to the governorate. During the festival, several seminars and dialogue sessions will be held, in addition to a show of horses, camels and a gliding show, among other activities.

Furthermore, the under-secretary pointed out that the ministry is preparing to hold the second edition of the Empty Quarter Festival at the Wilayat of Thamrait, the Governorate of Dhofar, from January 25 to February 3. The event will be held in cooperation with several public and private entities.

The Empty Quarter Festival, he said, aims to shed light on prominent winter tourism features and attract investors to available investment opportunities in the governorate.

The event will include various heritage, tourism, entertainment and sports activities, in addition to competitions and marketing exhibitions.

— With inputs from ONA

FAO official applauds Oman over food security

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The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has lauded the Sultanate of Oman for steps to ensure food security in the country. "The steps are way ahead," it said.

Speaking to the Observer on the sidelines of "The First International Forum of Expertise in the Field of Prospects for the Development and Art of Marketing and Promotion of Dates", Thaer Yaseen (pictured), Regional Plant Protection Officer, Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) at the Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa Region (RNE) said the Sultanate of Oman, along with the other GCC countries, have marched a great way forward in food security.

"The Sultanate of Oman is already working very well towards

Oman is the best example for connecting the countries and sharing the experience with others, opening doors for others to export the quality dates to others

THAER YASEEN

Regional Plant Protection Officer, FAO

food security. The country's food security situation improved the most globally, as per the latest Global Food Security Index (GFSI). Oman is ranked 35th in the world in the index in 2022 and fourth in the Middle East and North Africa region," he said.

According to the 11th edition



of GFSI published by Economist Impact and supported by Corteva Agriscience, the Sultanate of Oman's score went high by 13.8 points in 2022 to 71.2 compared to the figures of 2012. This gives the country the name of being the most improved country in the world, followed by China (+13.7),

Vietnam (+13.4), Bolivia (+12.2), the United Arab Emirates (+12) and Saudi Arabia (+11.8), among others.

The index measured food security in 113 nations based on food affordability, availability, quality and safety, and sustainability and adaptation. GFSI

has become a valuable tool across all sectors since its launch in 2012 and has been serving as a policy benchmark for governments and a country diagnostic tool for investment for both the private and public sectors.

"When it comes to dates cultivation and marketing, we recently had a lateral meeting together with our colleagues in Oman to improve the biological control and biological production and organic farming to be able to be open and consumers asking for healthy food with no contamination, no pollution and low impact to the environment, taking care of the climate change and having a green producing without any impact on nature," he added.

The Sultanate of Oman scored 88.6 in the affordability category (out of 100), 64.3 for availability, 73.2 for quality and safety,

and 53.6 for sustainability and adaptation.

He further said FAO had been working towards the idea of food security, and the idea of this was made with KSA to build the International Date Palm Council in 2000 and convince a country of the need how to have a national or international standard for dates and breaking the rules by making a healthy transaction of export and import between the countries is the key factor of making better market and better marketing between countries.

"Having low environmental impact or having no possibility to transport the best import and export of dates is the motto of the International Date Palm Council, and I feel that this meeting is an example of how Oman and other Gulf countries are taking care of food security in the region."



Dazzling

EVENTS AT
MUSCAT NIGHTS
VENUES

THE ACTIVITIES
OF MUSCAT
NIGHTS
HIGHLIGHT THE
DEPTH OF
ORIGINALITY
AND THE
CULTURAL
POTENTIAL OF
THE SULTANATE
OF OMAN



KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

A steady stream of visitors was seen at all four venues of the Muscat Nights on Sunday. Known earlier as Muscat Festival, the footfall at the Muscat Nights has witnessed an increasing trend on the third day since its opening.

Complemented by the cold weather and a pleasant breeze, Qurum Natural Park, Oman Convention and Exhibition Center, Oman Automobile Association ground, and Naseem Gardens have seen people from across the world. The events are aimed for visitors of all ages every day from 4 pm until 11 pm.

Past two days, families and other visitors were seen interacting with the artistes who performed at the festival venues.

of Oman, interest in small and medium enterprises, intellectual and economic social fields, and specialised events.

Although entry is charged a nominal amount of 100 Baizas, there will be specific fees for entering the specialised events being held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Center and the Omani Automobile Association.

In order to make it easier for visitors and beneficiaries and give them an opportunity to view the events and make selections, the link: <https://muscatnightslinks.com/> allows people to choose their desired activities, and those wishing to visit the events will be able to enter this page via the link and book tickets online, as well as learn about the locations of the events and what they include.

LASER AND DAZZLING SHOWS

Al Qurum Natural Park includes a number of activities that focus on the vicinity of the lake, including boat shows, helium shows with yacht decor and, artistic shows using dazzling lasers, light water shows; and these shows will be held at several intervals and repeated in the evening with artistic formations flying over the sky above the park.

A park with a cinema hall with a screen is set for the public and equipped restrooms, as well as a full 360-degree filming event, arena and carnival shows, horse shows and show jumping competitions, human boats with LD lighting technology, waterfalls lighting shows, and children's games.

THEATRE PERFORMANCES

There are a variety of artistic performances being held at the Qurum Natural Park, and a juggling segment with "Fred Sharp", in addition to wave shows, fire shows and other light shows, are events that one shouldn't miss out.





Musandam Governor’s office signs pact with Oman Data Park



MUSCAT: The Governor’s Office of Musandam on Sunday signed a cooperation agreement with Oman Data Park (ODP), to utilise the company’s cloud services in hosting the Governorate’s data centre.

The move comes in line with enhancing digital transformation and keeping pace with technological development.

As per the agreement, Oman Data Park will create and host the domain name and e-mail IDs for the Governorate of Musandam, where ODP will set an official electronic address for the Governorate to be used by visitors and beneficiaries of electronic services.

ODP will also create an e-mail ID for each employee in the governorate. It will also assure the safe hosting of the Governorate’s data and provides continuous technical support in a manner that raises the efficiency and effectiveness of government work.

The agreement was signed by Sayyid Ibrahim bin Said al Busaidy, Governor of Musandam and Eng Maqbool bin Salim al Wahaibi, CEO of Oman Data Park Company.

The signed agreement reflects the Governorate’s keenness to implement Oman Vision 2040 in a bid to accelerate the government’s digital transformation programme. — ONA

Social Investment Programme ends



IBRI: Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, presided over a ceremony on Thursday marking the conclusion of the social investment activities and programmes conducted by BP Oman in Al Dhahirah Governorate.

The ceremony was attended by Najeeb bin Ali al Rowas, Governor of Al Dhahirah.

The company’s social investment programmes included one code-named ‘Youth Echo Centre Programme’, which provides joint innovative workspaces and activities to embrace youth initiatives at the governorate level.

The company also conducted a “Reading Family Programme”, which focused on consolidating the role of mothers in spreading the culture of reading among their children. The programme comprised seminars and book shows and competitions. — ONA

New batch of police recruits join ROP



MUSCAT: The Royal Oman Police (ROP) in coordination with the Ministry of Labour, received a new batch of female citizens holding General

Education Diploma (GED), on Sunday.

The new batch will receive military training and academic studies as ROP strives to provide an exemplary environment for the training of women police recruits at the hands of specialised women trainers at the Institute of Women Police of the Sultan Qaboos Academy for police sciences after which they will be able to carry out their police duties at various formations of the Royal Oman Police. — ONA

■ WATER SUPPLY PROJECT IN SUHAR OPENS TODAY



The Oman Water and Wastewater Services Company (OWWSC) is holding the opening ceremony today for the water supply project from the desalination plant in Suhar to Al Dhahirah Governorate. The project estimated at RO 150 million will be presided by Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, in the presence of officials from the Wilayat of Ibri.

Two dams under construction in Salalah



SALALAH: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources is constructing a flood protection system in the Wilayat of Salalah in Dhofar Governorate, which will also store rain and flood water coming from the mountains and can be used at Salalah Port, Raysut Industrial City, and Salalah Free Zone.

One of the dams is located on the course of Wadi Adonab with a storage capacity of more than 83 million cubic metres of water, as it is the second largest dam in the Sultanate of Oman after Wadi Dayqah Dam in Muscat Governorate.

The second dam is located on the course of Wadi Aanar in Raysut with a storage capacity of 16 million cubic meters of water. The ministry is also developing side protection for the port of Salalah.

Eng Ali bin Bakhit Bait Saeed, Director, Water Resources Department, Directorate General of Agricultural, Fisheries and Water Resources, Dhofar Governorate, said in a statement to ONA that the completion of the ‘Wadi Adonab’ dam project has reached 22 per cent, with a total cost estimated at RO 24 million. The construction is expected to be completed during the second half of

2024. He also indicated that the project includes construction of a dam on the course of Wadi Adonab made of compacted earth, with a length of 386 metres and a height of 68 metres.

The two dams are part of the flood risk protection system, which includes the construction of 5 protection dams in Salalah.

The Director of the Water Resources Department explained that the completion rate of the ‘Aanar’ dam project is 26 per cent, at a cost of about RO 23 million later this year. — ONA

THE ROYAL GUARD OF OMAN

Tender Advertisement

The Royal Guard of Oman, announces the following tender:-

Tender Reference	Subject	Tender Document Value	Bid Submission Date
02/2023	IT Network Infrastructure Upgrade at RGOTC	RO 500/- non-refundable	13 th March 2023

Specialized Companies registered with the Government Tender Board, having Grade 1 & above, can collect the tender document from the Tender Committee Secretariat, The Royal Guard of Oman, Seeb during working hours from **Monday 23rd January to Thursday 02nd February 2023.**

Wax-sealed Tenders addressed to the Chairman - Tender Committee should be submitted to RGO before 1200 hours on the submission date along with a Tender Bond in the name of The Royal Guard of Oman equivalent to 1% (One Percent) of the tender value from any registered Bank in the Sultanate of Oman, valid for a period of 120 days from the date of bid submission. The tenderer should not reveal his identity other than the tender title and the address mentioned below.

No Tender will be accepted after the submission date. Tender submitted without the bond will be rejected.

The Royal Guard of Oman reserves the right to accept or reject any Tender without giving reasons.

Tender Committee
P.O Box 381C.P.O
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Covid curbs over, Chinese tourists hit Thai beaches

PHUKET, Thailand: Hitting the white sand beaches and eating mango sticky rice and seafood, Chinese tourists are returning to Thailand for their first trips abroad since China ended its strict Covid-19 curbs and reopened its borders.

“Because of the pandemic, we hadn’t been out of China for three years,” said tourist and business owner Kiki Hu, 28, in Krabi on Thailand’s southwest coast. “Now that we can leave and come here for holiday. I feel so happy and emotional”.

With China celebrating the Lunar New Year, Asia’s tourist hotspots have been bracing for the return of Chinese tourists, who spent \$255 billion a year globally before the pandemic. Countries from Thailand to Japan had depended on China as their largest source of foreign visitors.

Beijing in December abruptly dropped some of the toughest Covid restrictions on earth, which had battered the world’s second-biggest economy.

Business owner Yoyo Chen, 32, from Yiwu in central China, said returning to Thailand felt like coming home.

“I’m here to eat seafood. Previously, when I was here, I ate mango sticky rice, which was delicious. Back in China I kept thinking about the mango sticky rice here. I’m looking forward to the food, as well as visiting the beaches,” Chen said.

“Getting visas is very convenient now. The tourism industry is more developed here, there are lots of



People pray at a shrine in the Chinatown area of Bangkok on Sunday, on the first day of the Lunar New Year of the Rabbit. — AFP

fun activities and cuisine, and the Thai people are very hospitable,” she said. The Chinese return was welcomed by businesses, despite some wariness about a huge spike in Covid infections in China after Beijing ended its zero-Covid policy.

“We’re glad that China finally allows their people to travel. At the moment, we’ve received some bookings through March,” said Woranuch Maungtong, 44, manager of Tip-Top Destination on the resort island of Phuket, which provides daily speed boats to nearby islands.

China’s reopening raises hopes for the return of Chinese visitors, who accounted for nearly a third of Thailand’s 40 million foreign

tourist arrivals in pre-pandemic 2019.

The Thai government is expecting at least five million Chinese tourist arrivals this year, with some 300,000 coming in the first quarter.

Meanwhile, China rang in the Lunar New Year on Sunday with its people praying for health after three years of stress and financial hardship under the pandemic, as officials reported almost 13,000 new deaths caused by the virus between January 13 and 19.

Queues stretched for about one kilometre outside the iconic Lama temple in Beijing, which had been repeatedly shut before Covid-19 restrictions ended in early December, with thousands

of people waiting for their turn to pray for their loved ones.

One Beijing resident said she wished the year of the rabbit will bring “health to everyone”.

“I think this wave of the pandemic is gone,” said the 57-year-old, who only gave her last name, Fang. “I didn’t get the virus, but my husband and everyone in my family did. I still think it’s important to protect ourselves.”

Earlier, officials reported almost 13,000 deaths related to Covid in hospitals between January 13 and 19, adding to the nearly 60,000 in the month or so before that. Chinese health experts say the wave of infections across the country has already peaked.

— Agencies

President Jokowi’s approval rating at all-time high

JAKARTA: Indonesian President Joko Widodo’s approval rating has hit an all-time high after the government eased Covid-19 restrictions last month, a poll showed on Sunday.

Figures released by pollster Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI) showed satisfaction with the president, widely known as Jokowi, had risen consistently over recent months to reach 76.2 per cent at the start of 2023.

“In the last three months, the president’s performance has increased in (terms of) positive public perception from 62.6 per cent in September 2022 to 76.2 per cent. If we look at the last three months, the increase is quite significant,” LSI executive director Djayadi Hanan said.

The more than 10-point jump put Jokowi on his highest approval rating recorded by LSI during his current term which began in 2014.

“I think this was mostly because of the lifting of (Covid-19) social restrictions and a decrease in fuel prices,” Hanan said. “The narrative that the economy will be very difficult, particularly in 2023, has been there since the beginning of last year.” Jokowi’s announcement in December of the end of pandemic restrictions was well received, the pollster said, as the restrictions had been seen as hurting the economy.

The LSI poll, conducted between January 7-11 and covering more than 1,200 respondents, also comes months after the start of a high-profile



Indonesian President Joko Widodo attends a joint news briefing with Ukraine’s President Zelenskyy in Kyiv

trial against a former Indonesian police general.

The case sparked public uproar about alleged corruption and impunity within the police, but the fact that the case was made so public was taken as a sign that the government was at least trying to tackle the issues. LSI cited improvements in perceptions of the economy and law enforcement as reasons for the ratings jump.

Jokowi’s poll rating appears to have been unaffected by both the passing last month of a controversial new criminal code, and his issuing of an emergency regulation to replace the jobs law.

Jokowi is serving his second and final term in office with the next election scheduled for February 2024.

Sunday’s poll found Central Java Governor Ganjar Pranowo was the favoured candidate to succeed Jokowi, although his candidacy is yet to be announced.

— Reuters

Mysuru Zoo to host G20 Environment Working Group meet

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Mysuru Zoo, India’s one of two self-sustaining zoos, will host the first G20 Environment and Climate Sustainability Working Group (ECSWG) Meeting from February 9-11 under India’s G20 presidency. Mysuru Zoo has the distinction of having a unique concept where zoo animals are adopted and kept in a sustainable manner. Located in the Indian state of Karnataka, Mysuru Zoo started the practice of the adoption of zoo animals.

India will be holding the Presidency of G20 for one year. During its presidency year, the forum will bring together the G20 member countries, guest countries and international organisations (special invitees) to discuss a large number of

issues of international importance. A total of 13 Working Groups and two Initiatives will meet through the Sherpa Track under India’s Presidency to discuss priorities and come out with recommendations.

Under the Sherpa Track, Environment, Climate and Sustainability is a working group. The discussions, according to India’s Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change at ECSWG, will focus on the agenda ‘Promotion of Blue Economy along with Coastal Sustainability’, ‘Restoration of Degraded Lands and Ecosystems’ and ‘Enhancement of Biodiversity’ and ‘Strengthening of Circular Economy’.

In conjunction with the first Meeting in Bengaluru, Mysuru Zoo, in coordination with Central Zoo Authority, organised a two-day National Conference for Zoo Directors of India on January 18-19 and



then the Mysuru zoo was chosen as a venue to focus on the best practices in zoo management, news agency ANI reported.

The conference focused on ‘Master Planning and Building the National Capacity for Species Management and Conservation Breeding’. Some 59

participants from 25 states and a union territory participated in the conference. A task force team has been created to ensure preparedness and better coordination of the forum meeting.

The conference participants appreciated the Karnataka State Forest Department for its innovative IT tools designed to ensure faster delivery of public services and real-time monitoring of natural resources. The tools are known as e-Parihara, e-Gastu, and e-timber.

e-Parihara is an online application that helps in processing and sanctioning ex-gratia claims in cases of man-animal conflicts. It ensures transparency and efficiency in processing claims.

e-Gastu, an Android-based platform, captures forest patrolling/field activities undertaken by frontline staff of the forest department, which supervisory officers

can visualise over satellite imageries on a regular basis.

Similarly, an e-timber facility provides near real-time wood stock available in government timber depots and enables e-auction facilities for timber/ other forest produce in government timber depots.

In the course of the ECSWG meeting, The G20 delegates will visit Bengaluru-based Kalkere Arboretum and Bannerghatta Biological Park. At Kalkere, the delegates will have an opportunity to visualise and experience four predominant forest ecosystems of Karnataka.

The State Forest Department will also showcase the forest restoration models adopted in these ecosystems and the successful revival of faunal biodiversity in these areas. The Bannerghatta Biological Park will showcase the state-of-art butterfly park and animal safaris to the delegates.

SHORT TAKES

BEIJING

China logs 13,000 Covid deaths in a week

China reported nearly 13,000 Covid-related deaths in hospitals between January 13 and 19, after a top health official said the vast majority of the population had already been infected.

The death toll came a week after China said nearly 60,000 people had died with Covid in hospitals in just over a month — but there has been widespread scepticism over official data since Beijing abruptly axed anti-virus controls last month. China’s Center for Disease Control and Prevention



(CDC) said in a statement on Saturday that 681 hospitalised patients had died of respiratory failure caused by coronavirus infection, and 11,977 had died of other diseases combined with an infection over the period.

AMMAN

13 killed after building collapses in Aleppo

Thirteen people were killed when a residential building collapsed in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo on Sunday and rescue workers were searching for people believed still buried under the rubble, state media said.

The five-storey building in the Sheikh Maksoud district of Syria’s second largest city collapsed due to water leakages that weakened its foundation, government officials were quoted as saying by state media.



It is one of many buildings to collapse in recent years in Aleppo, which bore the brunt of intensive Russian and Syrian aerial bombing of areas under rebel control until rebels were driven out six years ago.

VATICAN CITY

Pope calls for end to violence in Peru

Pope Francis on Sunday called for an end to violence in Peru, where nearly 50 people have been killed during anti-government demonstrations in the past few weeks.

“No to violence, regardless of where it originates. No more deaths,” the Argentine pope said in Spanish at his weekly address to thousands of people in St Peter’s Square, briefly departing from the rest of the address, which was in Italian. Protests have flared in Peru since President



Pedro Castillo was ousted in December after attempting to dissolve the legislature to prevent an impeachment vote.

“Violence extinguishes the hope of a just solution to problems,” Francis said.



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In brief

■ CAIRO



ITALY'S FM EYES ENERGY ON TRIP TO CAIRO

Italy's Foreign Minister said on Sunday his country saw Egypt as an important partner in stemming irregular migration across the Mediterranean and in bolstering its energy security.

Though Egypt has largely prevented departures of migrant boats from its own north coast since 2016, the number of Egyptian nationals crossing to Europe via Libya has risen sharply. In 2022, 20,542 Egyptians disembarked in Italy, up from 1,264 in 2020. As part of efforts to tackle irregular migration, Italy was "ready to have more legal migrants, including those coming from Egypt", Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said.

■ TEL AVIV



ISRAEL PM REMOVES TOP MINISTER OVER COURT RULING

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu removed a top minister from office on Sunday following a Supreme Court ruling against Aryeh Deri's appointment which has shaken the nascent cabinet.

"It is with a heavy heart, with great sorrow and with an extremely difficult feeling that I am forced to transfer you from your position as a minister in the government," Netanyahu told Deri during a cabinet meeting, according to a statement from the premier's office. Deri was appointed health and interior minister last month as part of a coalition deal following Israel's November 1 elections.

■ MOGADISHU



EXPLOSION NEAR MAYOR'S OFFICE IN MOGADISHU

A huge blast tore through buildings near the mayor's office in central Mogadishu on Sunday, with gunfire erupting afterwards, police and witnesses said. "Terrorists blasted a vehicle loaded with explosives onto a perimeter wall of the Mogadishu mall which is next to the Banadir administration headquarters," police officer Abdullahi Mohamed said.

Witnesses said the explosion damaged nearby buildings and gunfire could still be heard near the mayor's office. There is gunfire going on inside the vicinity of the main building but we don't know what is happening inside.

France, Germany firm up ties as European 'driving force'

PARIS: Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz and France's President Emmanuel Macron on Sunday pledged to drive Europe forward together, as the German leader visited Paris to celebrate 60 years of post-war cooperation despite recent strains.

The historic partnership has been under pressure from Russia's war on Ukraine and broader tectonic shifts.

But in a speech at the capital's Sorbonne University, Scholz said upholding strong ties was key for the continent.

"The future, like the past, rests on cooperation between both our countries as the driving force of a united Europe," he said. Macron said that "Germany and France, because they cleared the path to reconciliation, must become pioneers to relaunch Europe".

He cited the need to "build a new energy model", encourage "innovation and the technologies of tomorrow", and ensure the European Union is "a geopolitical power in its own right, in defence, space and diplomacy".

The two leaders were then to take part in a joint cabinet meeting. The personal relationship between both men has been less than warm since Scholz assumed



France's President Emmanuel Macron with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz as they arrive to attend a cabinet meeting as part of the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Elysee Treaty in Paris, France, on Sunday. — Reuters

office in late 2021.

But "there are structural problems that go further than the personal relationship", said Jacob Ross, a researcher at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) in Berlin. The frictions are even felt by the public, with 36 per cent of French respondents and 39 per cent of Germans telling pollster Ipsos this week

The personal relationship between both the leaders has been less than warm since Scholz assumed office in late 2021

that relations were suffering.

The 1963 Elysee Treaty signed between post-World War II leaders Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle provided for everything from military cooperation to youth exchanges.

Since then, France and Germany have often built the foundation for joint crisis response in Europe. — AFP

Russia pushing towards two towns in Ukraine

MOSCOW: Russian forces are pushing towards two towns in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region, where fighting intensified this week after several months of a stagnant front, Russian state media reported on Sunday.

Russian-installed official in the region Vladimir Rogov said offensive actions were concentrated around two towns: Orikhiv, around 50 km south of Ukrainian-controlled regional capital Zaporizhzhia, and Hulyaipole, further east.

"The front is mobile, especially in two directions: Orikhiv and Hulyaipole," Rogov was quoted as saying by the Ria Novosti news agency.

He said there was active fighting in those areas, according to the agency.



Former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson visits the town of Borodianska, heavily damaged during Russia's war on Ukraine, outside of Kyiv, on Sunday. — Reuters

"The initiative is in our hands."

The Russian army later claimed for a second day in a row that it had taken "more advantageous lines

and positions" after "offensive operations" in Zaporizhzhia.

It claimed to have hit Ukrainian positions in the village of Lezhyno,

outside the regional capital of Zaporizhzhia, which has not fallen to Ukrainian forces. AFP was not able to verify this information.

In its daily report on Sunday, the Ukrainian army said "more than 15 settlements were affected by artillery fire" in Zaporizhzhia.

Earlier last week, Rogov announced a "local offensive" around Orikhiv and said the Russian army had taken control of the village of Lobkove, near the Dnipro river.

He also said this week that fighting has "sharply increased" in the southern region.

The front in southern Ukraine has been considerably quieter recently than in the east, with Moscow withdrawing from the major city of Kherson in November. — AFP

Arab states boycott regional meet in Tripoli

TRIPOLI: Arab states boycotted a meeting hosted by Libya's unity government on Sunday, with just five of the Arab League's 22 members sending their top diplomats and even the bloc's secretary general staying away.

The snub underlines divisions over the Tripoli-based government, whose legitimacy is contested by a rival administration in the war-torn country's east. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were not represented at all at the gathering — a preparatory session ahead of a foreign ministers' meeting in Cairo.

Four members sent lower-ranking ministers or ambassadors while Arab League chief Ahmed Aboul Gheit was also absent.

Najla al Mangoush, foreign minister in the Tripoli-based administration, condemned what she called "attempts by certain sides to crush Libyans' desire to transform Arab solidarity into a reality".

Libya, which holds the rotating presidency of the organisation, is "determined to play its role in the Arab League (and) rejects any attempt to politicise the League's founding documents," she said. Libya fell into a decade of violence following the 2011 overthrow of Moamer Gaddafi in a Nato-backed rebellion. The resulting power grab gave rise to myriad home-grown militias and prompted interventions.

Since March last year, an administration in Libya's east backed by military leader Khalifa Haftar has challenged the government. — AFP

10 dead in shooting outside Los Angeles venue

MONTEREY PARK: A man fatally shot 10 people at a ballroom dance venue where people were celebrating the Chinese Lunar New Year late on Saturday in a city on the eastern edge of Los Angeles, and he was still at large after fleeing the scene, police said.

Another 10 people were taken to local hospitals to be treated for injuries, and at least one was in critical condition, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department said early on Sunday morning, about five hours after the attack in Monterey Park.

When local police first arrived, people were "pouring out of the location screaming," department captain Andrew Meyer told reporters in a news briefing at the scene. There was no immediate information about a motive for the shooting or a description of the suspect or kind of gun used.



Investigators from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Homicide bureau walk away after briefing the media in Monterey Park, California on Sunday. — AFP

The shooting took place after 10 pm PST (06:00 GMT on Sunday) around the location of a Chinese Lunar New Year celebration where many downtown streets are closed for festivities that draw thousands of people from across Southern California. Police said the festivities planned for Sunday were now cancelled.

Monterey Park is a city of about 60,000 people around 11 km from downtown Los Angeles.

About two-thirds of its residents are Asian, according to US Census data, and the city is known for its many Chinese restaurants and groceries. The sheriff's department said it did not know whether the attack was racially motivated. Footage posted on social media showed injured people on stretchers being taken to ambulances by emergency staff. — AFP

ChatGPT is a chance, not an obstacle in education



Sandhya Rao Mehta

The writer is Associate Professor, Dept of English Language and Literature Sultan Qaboos University

By now, you must have heard of ChatGPT, the latest software that writes on command, on practically any topic and at any level.

Think of a company report, an evaluation of data for medical research, or a college essay, all this is freely available on ChatGPT. This is worrying all sectors, including content creators, lyricists, and of course, teachers.

But is ChatGPT just a tool which students can use to download untraceable essays for which they don't have to work? Is it just going to make students (and others who write or need ideas) to just be lazy?

ChatGPT introduces itself as an AI chatbot that 'interacts in a conversational way. The dialogue format makes it possible...to

answer follow up questions, admit its mistakes, challenge incorrect premises...' Touted as an alternative to Google, it does much more, as it can create complete, organised sentences and an argument with supporting evidence.

The reason why everyone is excited (and nervous) about this chatbot is that it is at present the best available way to create somewhat meaningful content.

The more information you provide, the more exact the writing will be.

Are the concerns of teachers and others valid? Is this the end of individual thinking? Will everybody just download an answer given by this format of AI (Artificial Intelligence) and if so,

PROFESSIONALS ACROSS DIFFERENT FIELDS HAVE USED CHATGPT TECHNOLOGY TO GENERATE TEXT AND FOUND THAT IT HAS MANY LIMITATIONS, FOR NOW

where does that leave those whose job it is to deduce from data, to think of implications and even write school/college essays.

To begin with, ChatGPT is useful and does save time. This is especially true, for instance, in radiology reports where an

automated report can be used by a physician for follow up action. It can also be used by lawyers to easily access previous rulings so that more time can be spent on the arguments for a new case.

So, is it too early to panic? The short answer is yes. Professionals across different fields have used this technology to generate text and found that it has many limitations, for now.

Firstly, ChatGPT cannot predict anything. This is because it is using data already available in its wide databank, so it cannot look into the future.

Secondly, it is too literal and tends to reply to inappropriate questions in an inappropriate way. It is also too verbose and uses

language that is clearly mechanical and has no cultural bias – that is, the unconscious mannerisms of a writer are just not there.

At the end of the day, all writing reflects an individual voice, a specific culture or a context.

AI, so far, hides behind a universal language bereft of all individuality. That is a reflection of living with robots, the stuff of science fiction. Luckily, we are not there yet.

For teachers, ChatGPT is just another opportunity to review the way in which teaching, and learning is being conducted. Using context, voice, application of ideas, as well as local examples, writing can remain original and learning productive.

Sudan’s prized gum trees ward off drought but workers wither

MENNA ZAKI

A vast belt of trees vital for global production of fizzy drinks helps Sudanese farmers adapt to climate change, but in the harsh drylands many are reluctant to take up the trade.

Gum Arabic, golden blobs of resin tapped from thorny acacia trees, is an emulsifying agent virtually irreplaceable for global industry. The ingredient is used in everything from soft drinks to chewing gum and pharmaceuticals.

Sudan is among the countries hardest hit by climate change but is also the world's largest producer of the raw gum.

"It's an important tree to fight desertification as it is drought resistant — and also increases the soil fertility, essential to increasing crop production," said Fatma Ramly, coordinator of the Gum Arabic Farmers' Association, which counts seven million members.

To harvest the amber-coloured resin, farmers must suffer the same climatic extremes as their trees.

"We work for hours on end under a burning sun," said Mohammed Moussa, who collects resin at the state-owned Demokaya research forest, about 30 kilometres from the North Kordofan state capital, El Obeid.

Moussa faces a constant struggle with the shortage of water in largely desert Sudan. His earnings from the trees barely "provide enough money to buy water to cover us until the autumn" rainy season.

Recorded temperatures in Sudan's Kordofan region have increased by almost two degrees Celsius in less than three decades, more than double the global average, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

"Water scarcity is one of the key challenges for people" living in the acacia zone, said Madani Ismail, of the state-run Agricultural Research Corporation. Farmers also have to contend with wide fluctuations in the price of gum on world commodity markets.

Forty-five kilograms (100 pounds) of raw gum can fetch 22,000 to 25,000 Sudanese pounds (\$43), depending on the day's price.

The return barely covers the cost of production for Abdelbaqi Ahmed, 52, who owns a 28-hectare plot of acacia trees in Botei, North Kordofan.

He cultivates other crops to help boost his income from the trees, whose bark he cuts with a "sunki" — a sharp blade attached to a long wooden shaft able to reach up high in the tree.

"It is a laborious task," said Ahmed, who sometimes hires others to help with the tapping. "So it doesn't usually pay off." — AFP

Indian movie still on the big screen after 27 years



Mujib Mashal

The writer is NYT's bureau chief for South Asia



Suhasini Raj

The writer has worked as an investigative journalist with Indian and international news outlets

Well past the film's intermission, the crowd keeps trickling in. Some pay at the ticketing window with a couple of taps on their phone; others dump fistfuls of coins.

They are students and office clerks, day labourers still chasing dreams in India's "maximum city," and the homeless with dreams long deferred.

India's film industry puts about 1,500 stories on the screen annually.

But the audience that files every morning into the Maratha Mandir cinema in Mumbai is here for a movie that premiered 27 years ago — and has resonated so intensely that this once-grand 1,100-seat theatre has played it everyday since, save for a pandemic hiatus.

The film, "Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge" — which translates as "The Big-Hearted Will Take the Bride" and is known as "DDLJ" — is a boy-meets-girl story set against the backdrop of a moment of immense change and unbridled possibility in India.

The Indian economy had just opened up, bringing new opportunities, new technologies and new exposure to a rising middle class. But it has also brought new strains as the choices afforded by economic opportunity — to decide your own love and your own life — ran up against the protective traditions of old.

In many ways, the India of today looks like the India reflected in the movie. The economy is still on the rise,

THE INDIA OF TODAY LOOKS LIKE THE INDIA REFLECTED IN THE MOVIE. THE ECONOMY IS STILL ON THE RISE, AND IT IS NOW ABOUT 10 TIMES THE SIZE IT WAS IN THE MID-1990S

and it is now about 10 times the size it was in the mid-1990s.

A technological revolution, this one digital, has opened new worlds. Women are seeking more freedom in a male-dominated society.

And the forces of modernity and conservatism remain in tension as an ascendant political right wing appoints itself the enforcer of conventional values.

The sense of unlimited possibility, however, has receded. As the early rewards of liberalisation peaked and economic inequities deepened, aspirations of mobility have diminished.

For those left behind, the world of "DDLJ" — its story and stars, its music and dialogue — is an escape. For those still striving, it is an inspiration.



People take selfies with a movie poster for Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge at the Maratha Mandir cinema in Mumbai.

And for those who have made it, it is a time capsule, the starting point of India's transformation.

"It grew and grew and grew and went on to, you know, become an heirloom," said actress Kajol, 48, who played the female lead, Simran, in the film. "I have had so many people who told me that, you know, 'We have made our children sit down and watch 'DDLJ'; we have made our grandchildren sit down and watch' — and I was like, 'There are grandchildren now?'"

She burst out laughing. "Children I am fine with. But grandchildren?"

When the pandemic closed theatres for a year, many speculated that "DDLJ's" record run would end.

But the film is back on for its 11:30 am slot at Maratha Mandir, often drawing crowds larger than those at afternoon screenings of the latest releases.

Some of those who show up have watched it here so many times that they have lost count — 50, 100, hundreds.

A taxi driver who was in the line outside the theatre one morning this fall had seen it six times, a welder about a dozen.

A gray-bearded merchant of second hand goods claimed about 50 viewings, the same for a 33-year-old delivery worker.

Then there were the regular regulars, those who trek here nearly everyday. Madhu Sudan Varma, a 68-year-old homeless man who has a part-time job feeding neighbourhood cats, comes about 20 mornings a month.

The woman with her head wrapped in a plastic bag? "I come everyday," she said. "I like it everyday."

No one knows her real name; it may be Jaspim, but even she is unsure. It doesn't matter, because everyone calls her by the name she prefers: Simran, just like the star on the screen.

Kajol said that the movie's middle path had broken new ground.

Before "DDLJ," she said, "we only had films that talked about either this way or that; either we had films that celebrated marriages and everybody was involved from uncles to auntsies, or it was 'us against the world; we will fight it out; we will live together, die together.' — *The New York Times*

Booklovers flocking together

The significance of books in one's life cannot be denied of course! In fact, books stand as the best friends for people at all times. A renowned Chinese proverb states, "A book is like a garden carried in the pocket".

Though, it is impossible to carry a garden in one's pocket, but this saying is metaphorically indicating the value of books. They are full of beauty, wonders, science and knowledge which all cultivate the mind and spirit.

Many are in love of books; not only adults and old ones, but children too are fans of books. Although sometimes they are fond of comic books or magazines, this stimulates reading culture among them.

By the time, reading becomes a habit for children as flipping the pages of cartoon magazines and comics will instill them to grab real books later. Reading then will be an irresistible behaviour and part of children's life.

Creating the culture of reading and eventually turning as a habit for children from their early ages does not happen overnight.

It usually starts since their early days; parents need to read for their children every day and night. Telling fairytales and reading short stories for children before bed time paves the way for getting reading habit into their life.

As they get younger, they will be reading on their own and reading will be a passion other than a habit.

Though with the advent of digital era and advanced technology, reading still attracts many children. Reading is never missed; children are given chances to get into reading opportunities.

At school, for instance, teachers are bringing different reading initiatives and competitions for students. Special reading projects are implemented too for outstanding students to hone their skills. Remedial reading exercises are also designed for low performing students to improve their abilities.

Various other public initiatives are also introduced to promote reading among children and family. Book fairs and festivities, like the recent one held



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CREATING THE CULTURE OF READING AND EVENTUALLY TURNING AS A HABIT FOR CHILDREN FROM THEIR EARLY AGES DOES NOT HAPPEN OVERNIGHT

by the Indian Embassy in Muscat, represented by the Indian Social Club, are very useful and encouraging endeavours to revive people's interest to read and learn. The recently-held reading and literacy event was really pleasing, attracting people of all ages to enjoy the different reading competitions and talks, especially children.

The four-day event brought together book lovers of all ages with different origins and interests to promote reading culture. All had mingled with book warms and enthusiasts, authors, artists, books club owners, and many others.

A wide range of exciting and insightful activities were conducted including knowledge sharing sessions, special talks by authors, panel discussions, experience sharing debates on reading-related aspects.

It was a commendable public cultural and educational event marks a great platform to promote the importance of reading and have it as a habit.

Reading represents a good feed for the minds and souls alike for children, parents, school students and society overall. This has been very obvious in the event's audience comprising families, children, parents, individuals and students too. All have merged for one cause, which the love of reading and books. Such initiative could be reoccurred every now and then in different parts of the country, so it serves similar causes.

Public entities, schools and sports or social clubs need to organise similar educational gatherings. Such events play a key role to place reading in one's life.

As reading is undoubtedly very valuable habit, it should not be disconnected from children's life. Reading should be programmed as a habit for children.

Let reading be unconsciously a habit that they like and enjoy with no pressure put on them to practice it. Let kids limit their time and interest of how much time they take or how much they read.

'SNOW' WALK



People walk during snowfall in the Schoenbrunn Palace garden in Vienna, Austria, on Sunday. – AFP

The Second Green Revolution will be digitised

Farming is one of the world's oldest and most far-reaching endeavours. Meeting the growing food demands of the global population – projected to reach ten billion by 2050 – amid accelerating climate change presents an unprecedented high-wire act that requires human ingenuity, good governance, and technology.

The last time the agriculture sector went through a seismic shift like this was when new technologies, such as high-yielding wheat and rice seeds, chemical fertilisers, and irrigation technologies, kicked off the Green Revolution in the 1960s.

In the following three decades, cereal production in famine-prone Asia doubled, and wheat and rice became cheaper, even though the population increased by 60 per cent during this period.

Unfortunately, the Green Revolution brought with it a host of environmental costs. Lax regulations and generous subsidies made fertilizers and pesticides cheap, and farmers, with no training, used them excessively, leaving soil damaged and waterways polluted. As new crops took over, traditional plant varieties were lost, contributing to biodiversity loss.



Maximo Torero

The writer is Chief Economist of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

SIX DECADES AFTER THE GREEN REVOLUTION BEGAN, THE RISE OF ROBOTICS AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE MAY USHER IN ANOTHER AGRICULTURAL TRANSFORMATION.

The rise of robotics and artificial intelligence might help usher in a second, even greener Green Revolution. Robots are already harvesting crops, weeding, and collecting data to improve soil management. Soon, they will be as common in farm pastures and greenhouses as they are in medical labs or Amazon warehouses.

The hope is that AI can help meet food and climate goals by adding more precision to agriculture, thus allowing farmers to grow more and waste less.

AI-powered programs, like IBM's Watson, combine data on weather patterns, crop yields, and market prices to advise farmers regarding the best time to plant, the precise amount of fertilisers to use, and when to harvest for peak ripeness.

Researchers at Microsoft and Wageningen University in the Netherlands are growing cucumbers with the help of algorithms, combining the efforts of humans and AI to boost yields while using fewer natural resources.

In California, a state that grows irrigated fruits and vegetables at a large scale, such technologies



To be sure, technology alone will not right the world's wrongs.

mean real savings in seasonal labor requirements. For example, a \$150,000 "grape-gobbling robot" can sort two tonnes of grapes in 12 minutes, replacing 15 human workers – as well as reducing the use of fertilisers, pesticides, and water, while producing higher yields.

In the past, agricultural automation was characterised by large industrial farms using heavy machinery to boost yields.

Mechanisation on this scale increased producers' dependence on fossil fuels and the unbridled use of chemicals. The steep cost also meant that small farmers,

especially in poorer countries, lacked access, creating an uneven playing field.

Digital technologies are changing this to benefit both large-scale and small-scale farms. Farmers have taken a page from ride-sharing apps like Uber, using GPS tracking devices and fleet-management software that allows small producers to share assets required for agricultural mechanisation.

Some companies, like TROTRO Tractor in Ghana and Tun Yat in Myanmar, allow small farmers to share the cost of renting a tractor they could

not afford alone. Digital support can also upgrade traditional mechanisation, even if it is not advanced technology.

For example, GPS devices that track cattle ("smart collars") and transmit data about animals' health and movements can determine the amount of feed to dispense and automate the feeding process, improving productivity.

The great advantage of robotics is its potential for cost-effectiveness, allowing small farmers to compete with their larger counterparts.

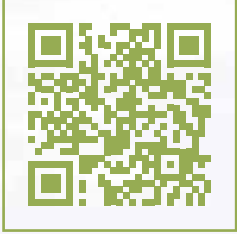
Like computers and smartphones, these machines, once manufactured in large volumes, should become much less expensive, thus paving the way for wider use.

But robotics and AI-based tools, which favour highly skilled farmers over low-skilled ones, have the potential to deepen existing inequality.

They could further alienate the world's poorest people, especially those who live in rural areas and eke out a living on a small plot of land without access to markets or financial services.

SPORT

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Mohammed El Morabity tops ODM day one

BROTHER RASHID TAKES SECOND;
OMANI RUNNERS SHINE

ANUROOP
ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, JAN 22

Morocco's Mohammed El Morabity topped the 47-kilometre first stage of Oman Desert Marathon 2023 with an impressive time of 3 hours and 53 minutes on Saturday.

Defending champion Rashid El Morabity, brother of Mohammed, came in second eight minutes later at 4 hours and 1 minute.

Earlier, the eighth edition of the annual Oman Dessert Marathon (ODM) kicked off on Saturday morning in Wilayat of Bidiya from Al Wasil Fort, with four runs. While the race is usually reserved for professional marathon runners with distances such as 165 km, this year's race also included a children's 2 km run, a 5 km run, and 10 km.

The four-day 165 km started on January 21 and it will end on January 24. It is divided into four stages: 47 km distance on day one, 55 km on day two, 42 km on day three and 21 km on the fourth



and final day.

When asked about his experience on day one, Rashid said he mainly enjoyed going head-to-head with his brother.

"The weather was pleasant today. I was mainly competing with my brother, and we enjoyed the 47 km run. This route had various terrains, including tall sand dunes, wadis, and flat land," he said.

At around 24 km, Rashid and Mohammed El Morabity were going head-to-head.



Soon after the Moroccan brothers made it to 23 km of the route, they were followed by Omani runners, Saleh al Saidi and Sami al Saidi.

This year the terrain was unusually green, due to the rains that fell over the area in recent days.

Saleh al Saidi was the first Omani male to complete today's track, with a finishing time of 4 hours and 19.34 minutes, followed by the Sami al Saidi who arrived at 4:30.19.

On the women's side, Morocco's Aziza El Marany proved her athleticism with an impressive finishing time of 5:31:29, and she was shortly followed by Aziza Raji, who crossed the finish line at 5:37:53. The Swiss, Corina Sommer adapted well to the desert, finishing day one as the third woman, with a time of 5:45.47.

THREE DROP OUT

Three runners dropped out on day one as it proved to be difficult



for one of the runners mentally, while the other two sustained injuries to their knees.

After making it through 30 km, Italian runner Mauro Nadalutti decided that he did not want to continue, in spite of his good spirits, as he did not have the mental strength to tackle Oman's rough dessert. Despite dropping out of the race however, Nadalutti decided to continue enjoying the dessert and cheering on his tent mates.

There were 18 Omani runners,

as well as 24 international runners from different parts of the world including Italy, Germany, Poland, the UK, Morocco, France, Spain, Belgium, Ukraine, and Switzerland.

Sunday's route is 55 km, and while the race started with 44 runners, only 41 runners are going through to day two.

The race is being sponsored by a host of entities including the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, Oman Athletic Association, Tanuf, Omantel, Oman LNG, Jawharat Bidiyah Resort, OTSO, A'saffa, Pocari Sweat, Mwasalat, Camelback, Lulu Hypermarket, Oman Air, Tactical Trading, and Al Forn Cafe.

ODM DAY 1 RESULTS

1. Mohammed El Morabity (MAR) 3:53:31
2. Rashid El Morabity (MAR) 4:01:51
3. Saleh al Saidi (OMA) 4:19:34
4. Sami al Saidi (OMA) 4:30:19
5. Hamdan al Khatri (OMA) 4:31:53
6. Evgenii Glyva (UKR) 4:45:47
7. Moosa al Balushi (OMA) 5:13:46
8. Ghaith Saif (OMA) 5:23:35
9. Aziza El Amrany (MAR) 5:31:29
10. Aziza Raji (MAR) 5:37:53

Oman Club, Ahli Sidab enter first division final

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 22

Defending champions Oman Club and Ahli Sidab will meet in the final of the 2022-2023 first division handball league championship on Wednesday. The match will start in the main indoor hall of the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex at 6 pm.

Both teams secured spot in the final after Oman Club topped the league order in its final stage as the Muscat-based team managed to have 16 points, followed by their neighbours Ahli Sidab who snatched the other ticket to the final. Muscat came in third place as they suffered a 23-19 defeat against the group second-placed Ahli Sidab.

Al Shabab were dropped to the second division league as they lost to Nizwa club 21-29.

HH Sayyid Fahar bin Fatik al Said will be the chief guest for the final in presence of Dr Said al Shahri, Chairman of

Oman Handball Association (OHA), and other officials.

On the other hand, the matches of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth handball shield championship for this season began on Friday with six games.

Salalah managed to end their opening game against Dhofar with a huge 50-13 win, while Al Ittihad snatched a 35-15 victory over Mirbat in another game in Dhofar Governorate. Nizwa edged Qurayat 31-21 while Masirah managed to register a crucial 30-18 win over Al Talieah club. Al Bashayer thrashed Saham 47-15 in another match while Al Shabab and Al Musannah fixture did not take place as both teams withdrew.

Ahli Sidab were champions of the previous edition of the 2021-22 ministry's handball shield championship as they beat Oman Club 25-24 in the final in March 2022. Muscat club finished in third place.



Iraq FA apologises to Oman fans

MUSCAT: The Iraq Football Association (IFA) issued a statement about the events that preceded the final of Arabian Gulf Cup match between Oman and Iraq, which concluded in Basra.

The official statement said, "The Iraq Football Association expresses its deep regret that the high crowd turnout during the final match led to a delay in the Omani fans entering the stadium to support their national team."

Adnan Darjal of IFA, said, "On behalf of the organising committee, IFA apologises to the Omani fans who were late in entering the stadium to attend the match, which was a contributing factor in the success of the tournament. We extend sincere thanks to those in charge of Omani football led by His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, and OFA Chairman Shaikh Salem al Wahaibi for their support to Iraq in organising the 25th edition of the Arabian Gulf Cup."

Darjal said the IFA look forward to strengthen tie-up with Oman.

"Thank you from the heart for your presence in the Basra International Stadium, and we repeat our regret for your delay in entering the stadium due to the huge local crowd presence who came from all governorates of Iraq to attend the final match."



Al Bashayer festival to offer 20 cars and 15 icons

WALEED AL JAHWARI
MUSCAT, JAN 22

With the support of HH Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs and Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, Al Bashayer Square Committee for Arabian Camels revealed the details of the sixth edition of Al Bashayer annual festival 2023, which will be held on February 13 to 18, at Al Bashayer Square in the Wilayat of Adam.

Dr Abdullah bin Salem al Junaibi, Director of the Al Bashayer Square for Arabian Camels, unveiled the event details during the media conference that was held on Sunday in Al Bashayer Square.

The sixth edition of the festival will continue for six days with Omani and GCC participants, competing in 74 rounds in different categories to win the value prizes, 20 value cars and 15 icons including the golden and silver swords.

The first day, February 13, will be for 'Hagayeg' category, two years old, for 4 km. Eighteen races will be in the morning with cash prizes for the top ten. In the afternoon, there will be six main races with car prizes for the winner and cash prizes for the top ten.

The second day, February 14, was allocated for the 'Lagay'

category, three years old, for 5 km divided into 15 races in the morning time with cash prize for the top ten. Five main races will start in the afternoon, five cars for the winners and cash prize up to tenth place.

The third day, February 15, will be for 'Yathaa' category, 4 years old, for 6 km race. Eleven races will be in the morning with cash prizes for the top ten. Four main races will be in the afternoon, the winners will have cars and cash prizes for the top ten.

Fourth day morning, February 16, will be for 'Thanaya' category, 5 years old, for a distance of 8 km. Four races are allocated for 'Al Hawl' category, 6 years and above. Both categories will have cash prize for the top ten.

The afternoon competitions will be for human riders, two races will be for 1,500 metres and the main race will be for 12 km. The winner will receive a SUV car and cash prizes for the top ten.

The concluding ceremony will be held on the final day, February 18, afternoon. The day include 4 main races for 8 km for old category -- two races will be for individuals with SUV cars prizes for the winners and two races will be for organisations. The winner in the fourth race will have the golden sword and SUV car (Lexus), while the third race winner will get silver and (Land Cruiser).

40 TITLES DECIDED ON FINAL DAY OF WORLD VETERAN TT

MUSCAT: The final day of the World Veteran Table Tennis Championships Muscat 2023, held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC), saw prizes presented in 40 events.

Two players in particular will look back on the day with fond memories as they completed the coveted 'full house' of medals. Maria Donner of Finland and India's Mantu Murma won gold in each of the competitions they were eligible. Donner added the women's singles gold in the 40-45 years category to the mixed doubles gold she won with Sweden's Igor Krokhim and the women's doubles she won with Sofia Westhorm.

Murma, meanwhile, won mixed doubles gold in the 60-year group with Vinay Chopra and then won women's doubles with Jette Vieg.

Presenting the winners in the singles events was Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Undersecretary for Sports and Youth at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth. He said: "The World Veteran Table Tennis Championships 2023 is an essential part within the ITT calendar, with many players keen to take part every two years. We are delighted that 1,600 participants from 69 countries have visited Oman to enjoy our well-known warm hospitality firsthand."

"We are immensely proud to have received positive feedback on the country's hosting and organisational capabilities to making this event groundbreaking. Oman's unique charm and authentic Arabian experience, combined with the state-of-the-art facilities at the Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre, has made this edition like no other in the event's history."

Elsewhere in the championship, Gregor Forster and Zsolt-Georg Bohm of Germany, and Norway's Paal Guttormsen and Japan's Kazuo Masuda all finished with two gold medals.

Bohm and partner Boris Rosenberg won the men's doubles 60-year competition and then went on to take the men's singles 60-64 years crown by beating Wang Yansheng in the final.



Paal Guttormsen, won the men's singles 65-69 years title, after winning the mixed doubles 65-year the day before with Estonia's Kai Thornbech.

Forster and Masuda each won two gold and one bronze. Forster won the men's singles 40-year gold, and earlier secured the men's doubles 40 years title with Michael Marsden of Wales. He also won a bronze in mixed doubles 40 years with Germany's Tatiana Pokrovskaya. Masuda won the men's singles 85-year event and partnered with Reiko Miura to then win the mixed doubles. He also secured a bronze in men's doubles 85-year with Sweden's Urban Living.

As the doubles events wrapped

up, Latvia's Ina Jozepsone, Switzerland's Margit Geiger, Germany's Heidi Wunner and Donna Sakai all secured two titles each.

Ina Jozepsone won the mixed doubles with her compatriot Sandis Vasiljevs in the 50-year age group, and then claimed women's doubles gold with Germany's Sylvia Messer. Margit Geiger claimed mixed doubles gold with Romania's Andreas Fejer-Konnerth in the 55-year competition, and gold in the women's doubles with partner Liliia Andrieieva from Ukraine. Geiger also added a bronze in the women's singles 55-59 years.

In the 75-year category, Donna Sakai won mixed doubles gold

with her husband David and the women's doubles top prize with compatriot Connie Sweeris.

In the 80-year events, Heidi Wunner secured mixed doubles gold with Dimitrije Bilic and then partnered with Ruth Schneider to claim women's doubles gold. She also takes home silver in the women's singles 80-84 years.

Hungary's Gizella Zacher was the only winner from the last event in Las Vegas to repeat the feat. The women's singles 70-74 winner in 2018 secured the 75-79 years title this time around.

Denmark's Pia Toelhoj and Sweden's Petra Sorling, ITTF President, had to settle for silver in the 50-year category. However, Pia Toelhoj did manage to win the women's singles 55-59 years title later in the day.

Trine Grauholm won the women's singles 45-49 years title; Estonia's Kai Thornbech emerged victorious in the 65-69 years category; Singapore's Liang Mui Heng secured 50-54 years gold. However, several age groups were dominated by Japanese players; the 70-74 years title went to Kazuko Horino, Noriko Watanabe won the 80-84 years event, Reiko Miura struck gold in the 85-year competition.

'HONOURED BY TRUST'

In the men's singles, Iran's Mehran Ahadi won the 45-49 years event; Henrik Vendelbo emerged as the 50-54 years winner; China's Pan Yan emerged as 55-59 years winner; India's Yogesh Desai won the 70-74 years event and Niels Ramberg won gold in the 75-79 years category.

Commenting after the closing ceremony, Abdullah Bamakhalif, President of the Oman Table Tennis Association, said, "It has given us a great pleasure to welcome participants from around the world to compete in the Sultanate of Oman. The International Table Tennis Federation entrusted us to stage the event in our beautiful country that is known for its welcoming hospitality and breathtaking landscapes. We are honoured by this trust."

Three-day camel race in Barka from today

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 22

The third qualifying race for the final race of the annual festival of private camel racing in its 20th season 2022-23 will start on Tuesday at Al Fulaij Racecourse in Barka.

As many as 45 races will be held over three days starting on Tuesday. The first day will witness 19 rounds for the category of pilgrims for a distance of 4 km, 13 rounds are for Al Bakar, and 6 rounds are for Jadaan. From the 'Hajja' (pilgrim) category,

Bakkar Al Nouq, who finish in the first three places from the first to the fifth rounds will qualify. In the sixth to the eighth rounds, the camels that rank first and second will make the mark.

The second day's competitions include 17 races, 11 races are for the Al Laqaya category for a distance of 5 km, 8 runs for Al Bakar, and 3 for Al Jadaan. From the second round until the fourth round, the camels with the first three positions qualify. In addition to 6 runs for Al Jadaan for 6 km, 4 runs are for virgins,

and 2 runs for Al Jadaan. The camels that finish in positions from the first to the tenth will qualify for the final race in the first round, while the camels that finish in the first places will qualify for the second and third rounds.

The competitions of the third day include seven rounds, three rounds are allocated to the Al Thanaya category for 8 km, including two rounds for the Al Bakar, and the camels that finish in the top 10 will qualify in the first round, and a round will be held for the Al Jadaan without

qualification, and it will also include three rounds allocated to the Al Hawl category for the same distance.

In the first round, the camels that rank in top 20 will qualify, and a run for the Zamoul category for the same distance without qualifying. Two rounds will be held for the long-distance run for the Al Thanaya and Al Hawl categories with camels that finish in top 10 positions qualify.

Contest terms

The Royal Camel Corps announced general conditions

for participation in the races. The participation is limited to purebred Omani camels wholly owned by Omani citizens, and it is strictly forbidden to activate with blood or use stimulants, electric shocks, and other prohibited stimuli. The Oman Camel Racing Federation will take undertakings not to use prohibited stimulants and stimulants of all kinds and forms as a condition for participating in the races.

The camels that win the first positions will be examined for all stimulants in all race runs, and in the event that stimulants are discovered, the award will be withheld, and the

penalties stipulated in the regulations and laws approved by the Omani Camel Racing Federation, and the decision of the technical committees concerned with teething and analogy is considered enforceable according to the applicable law in this regard. It is also stipulated that the motorised rider's protector should be placed under the base of the motorised vehicle, provided that it has thick and wide dimensions, and any mount whose owner does not comply with this condition will be excluded.



TSITSIPAS BATTLES PAST SINNER INTO QUARTERS

SWIATEK, GAUFF CRASH OUT



Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas reacts during his fourth round match against Italy's Jannik Sinner. – Reuters



Latvia's Jelena Ostapenko in action during her fourth round match against Coco Gauff of the US. – Reuters

MELBOURNE: Stefanos Tsitsipas battled into the Australian Open's last eight on Sunday but women's top seed Iga Swiatek and a tearful Coco Gauff became the latest big-name victims.

Swiatek's defeat to Elena Rybakina made it the first Grand Slam since the Open era began in 1968 to lose the top two seeds in both the men's and women's draws before the quarterfinals.

That left Greece's Tsitsipas as the highest remaining men's seed at three, and he avoided the fate of Rafael Nadal and Casper Ruud with a dogged victory over Jannik Sinner.

Tsitsipas, who is pursuing a first major crown, defeated the Italian 15th seed 6-4, 6-4, 3-6, 4-6, 6-3 to set up a quarterfinal with the unseeded Jiri Lehecka.

"It was a long match, I felt like I spent an entire century on this court playing tennis," said the 24-year-old Tsitsipas, who has seen the draw open up for him with six of the top 10 seeds out.

"What a great night. That was superb, 'a ripper' as they say here."

Czech world number 71 Lehecka defeated sixth seed Felix Auger-Aliassime in four sets in yet another surprise result.

The 21-year-old Lehecka was knocked out in the first round at the four majors last year but was too hot for the Canadian, winning 4-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7/2), 7-6 (7/3).

"After losing in the first round last year, if someone had told me before the tournament that I would be playing like this, I wouldn't have believed them," said Lehecka.

"I'm super happy and excited."

Giant-killer Sebastian Korda surged into a maiden Grand Slam quarterfinal and faces 18th-seeded Karen Khachanov of Russia.

The American 29th seed came through a

rollercoaster 10-point deciding tie-break to beat 10th seed Hubert Hurkacz 3-6, 6-3, 6-2, 1-6, 7-6 (10/7).

Korda, whose father Petr won the title in 1998, produced one of the performances of his career to upset two-time Australian Open finalist Daniil Medvedev in the third round.

COCO'S TEARS

The women's draw also has an unfamiliar look, after a day of shocks.

Wimbledon champion Rybakina swept past the 2022 French and US Open winner Swiatek 6-4, 6-4 in 1hr 29min at a stunned Rod Laver Arena.

Moscow-born Kazakh Rybakina, seeded 22, moves on to a last-eight encounter with Jelena Ostapenko.

World number one and hot favourite Swiatek admitted Rybakina deserved to win.

"I felt the pressure," Swiatek, 21, said. "I felt that I didn't want to lose instead of wanting to win."

Swiatek, who dominated women's tennis last year and is already a three-time major champion, added: "I felt today that I don't have that much left to fight even more."

AUSTRALIAN OPEN RESULTS

MEN (FOURTH ROUND)

Karen Khachanov (RUS x18) bt Yoshihito Nishioka (JPN x31) 6-0, 6-0, 7-6 (7/4); Sebastian Korda (USA x29) bt Hubert Hurkacz (POL x10) 3-6, 6-3, 6-2, 1-6, 7-6 (10/7); Stefanos Tsitsipas (GRE x3) bt Jannik Sinner (ITA x15) 6-4, 6-4, 3-6, 4-6, 6-3; Jiri Lehecka (CZE) bt Felix Auger-Aliassime (CAN x6) 4-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7/2), 7-6 (7/3)

WOMEN (FOURTH ROUND)

Elena Rybakina (KAZ x22) bt Iga Swiatek (POL x1) 6-4, 6-4; Jelena Ostapenko (LAT x17) bt Coco Gauff (USA x7) 7-5, 6-3; Jessica Pegula (USA x3) bt Barbora Krejickova (CZE x20) 7-5, 6-2

She follows second seed Ons Jabeur out the Melbourne exit door, the Tunisian having gone out in the second round in another surprise.

Latvian 17th seed Ostapenko provided the second upset of a crazy few minutes by knocking out seventh seed Gauff 7-5, 6-3 on neighbouring Margaret Court Arena.

The 18-year-old American broke down in tears during an emotional post-match press conference.

She had been favourite to defeat Ostapenko, the 2017 French Open winner.

But the 25-year-old Ostapenko was always in control to ensure that Gauff must wait at least a little longer for a first major title.

Gauff told reporters it was a "little bit frustrating", then her voice suddenly began to crack and the tears flowed.

There were no tears for Jessica Pegula however, the American third seed powering into the last eight with a 7-5, 6-2 win over former French Open champion Barbora Krejickova.

Pegula, now the title favourite, faces two-time Australian Open champion Victoria Azarenka or unseeded Zhu Lin of China. — AFP

Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina in action during her fourth round match against Poland's Iga Swiatek. – Reuters

Bank Muscat launches 12th edition of Green Sports programme

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat has launched the 2023 edition of its flagship CSR programme, Green Sports, and has invited all local sports teams who would like to apply for the programme to do so well before the deadline on February 18, 2023.

The Green Sports programme is developed to help local sports teams enhance their role in the community and provide suitable infrastructure that can help the youth develop their talents. The scope of Green Sports support for sports teams include greening of football fields with natural or synthetic turf, floodlights and water desalination equipment in areas facing problems of water salinity. This year too, 20 sports teams from different governorates will be provided support in one of the four categories available to them.

To improve the programme's



Talib Al Makhmari

inclusivity and reach across the Sultanate of Oman, applications can be submitted digitally. For more information and to submit applications, teams should go to: <https://techgurusa.com/greensports/green-stadium-participation-form-terms.aspx> and complete the application form electronically using a computer, a tablet or a mobile phone. All applicants should be



able to showcase their positive impact and contributions to the local community. In case of any queries or doubts on the submission process, teams may email GreenSports@bankmuscat.com, or call 24768595/24801200/24801625 for more details.

Speaking about the launch of the 2023 edition, Talib bin Saif al Makhmari, Manager,

Community & Media Relations, Bank Muscat, said: "We are pleased to see the positive social impact that Green Sports has created since its launch in 2012 as it is considered one of the major sustainable programmes the bank is implementing. It was developed to support talented Omani youth by enhancing the infrastructure available to local sports teams in the Sultanate

ALL APPLICANTS
ARE INVITED TO
SUBMIT THEIR
APPLICATIONS
BEFORE
FEBRUARY 18,
2023

of Oman. We would like to encourage all teams who would like to apply for the support to submit their applications through the specified link ahead of the deadline. Going ahead, the bank will continue its support to sports teams through Green Sports and help the youth meet their aspirations in this field."

Talib al Makhmari thanked all

sports teams for their confidence in Green Sports Programme as it witnesses excellent and spirited competition every year. This confirms the success of the programme in enhancing this important sector. He wished the applicants all the best with their applications this year.

It is a matter of great encouragement that Bank Muscat's Green Sports programme has so far benefitted 163 teams with over 50,000 team members across the Sultanate of Oman and with yet another 20 teams to be added this year. In the past few months, the bank has seen the inauguration of more Green Sports fields across Oman. The facilities developed as part of the programme are often used as a venue for other social activities by local communities, leading to stronger social bonding and positive behaviour among young people.



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Abraj Energy to offer 49 per cent in IPO on MSX

Strong performance:
Subscription period is expected to commence in February, after receiving CMA approval

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 22

Abraj Energy Services SAOG (under transformation) – part of OQ Group – announced on Sunday, January 22, its intention to proceed with an initial public offering (IPO) and listing on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX), which is expected to take place in March 2023.

The announcement came at a media briefing hosted by the MSX where officials said the planned listing will allow investors to gain exposure to a leading onshore oil and gas field services provider in Oman, with a wide service offering including drilling, workover and well services.

The offering, representing up to 49 per cent of Abraj's total issued share capital, amounts to the divestment of shares currently held by the selling shareholder, OQ. A minimum of 51 per cent shareholding will continue to be indirectly held by OQ.

The Offering is being offered to



eligible investors in the Sultanate of Oman and eligible international investors outside the United States (the Phase I Investors' and to retail investors in Oman (Phase II Investors").

The subscription period for Phase I and Phase I investors is expected to commence in February, after receiving the required approval from the regulator. Admission of the shares to trading on the MSX is expected in March 2023.

The Offering will be conducted in two tranches, being carried out concurrently as defined below:

(I) Institutional offering (Phase

I) represents a maximum of 85 per cent of the total Offering, and will be made to eligible investors in Oman and international investors outside the United States Retail offering (Phase II) represents a minimum of 15 per cent of the total Offering, and will be made to retail investors.

(II) If there is excess demand from retail investors, the Phase II offering may be increased up to a maximum of 35 per cent of the total Offering size in line with the regulatory requirements, and the Phase I offering will be reduced in size accordingly.

Alternatively, if the aggregate

demand from retail investors in Phase I is less than 15 per cent of the Offer, then after full allocation to retail investors, the balance of the shares shall be made available to institutional investors in the Phase I offering, if there is oversubscription in Phase I.

Commenting on the announcement, Ayad al Balushi, Chairman of the Board of Directors, Abraj, said: "Through its commitment to technological innovation and quality services, Abraj has earned its place as one of the leading Omani onshore oilfield drilling and well services companies. We are confident

that Abraj is now well positioned to enter its next phase of growth as a publicly listed company on the Muscat Stock Exchange and look forward to welcoming our new shareholders on our growth journey."

Saif al Hamhami, CEO of Abraj, added: "Throughout economic cycles, Abraj has demonstrated remarkable resilience, delivering strong financial performance and growth and ongoing innovation in new drilling technologies and well services.

These are fundamentally important attributes as we look to an ambitious future of continued leadership in Oman and a corporate strategy that leverages the Company's long-standing relationships and diverse customer base.

Through this Offering, we believe investors have an opportunity to gain exposure to a profitable, growing Company with one of the MENA region's youngest drilling fleets.

We believe the Company's future is very bright, not least because it is already prequalified in four countries to conduct a range of services, setting the stage for international expansion geared towards delivering growth and shareholder value."

Ahli Bank, EFG-Hermes UAE Limited (acting in conjunction with EFG Hermes UAE LLC) and National Bank of Oman have been appointed as Joint Global Coordinators, and Ahli Bank and National Bank of Oman have been appointed as Issue Managers.

Abraj is the leading and largest drilling contractor in Oman by contracted operating drilling rigs, with 29 per cent market share.

The Company has a diverse service offering, including drilling, workover and well services which includes fracturing, cementing and coiled tubing.

It is also a regional pioneer in using integrated hydraulic fracturing services to further the development of unconventional deep tight oil and gas in the Sultanate of Oman.

Abraj had RO 593 million (\$1.5 billion) worth of order backlog for the years 2023 through 2031 as at September 30, 2022, equivalent to more than the last five full years of revenue.

Abraj boasts strong revenue - for the year ended December 31, 2021, the Company earned RO 125 million (\$323 million) from contracts with customers and had a CAGR of 23 per cent from 2007 to 2021, supported by growth in its drilling rig fleet.

Forum to discuss new National Human Resources Strategy



HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, JAN 22

The Ministry of Labour and the Oman Society for Human Resources Management (OSHRM) yesterday unveiled details of the upcoming HR Conference in Muscat. The 6th edition of the summit, titled 'The New Era of Work', will take place from February 7 to 9, 2023 at the Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre.

The three-day conference will offer a variety of workshops and panel discussions related to the field of human resources. "The conference aims to develop human resources,

enhance human capital and embrace the new work culture", shared Manal al Harthy, Board Member and Chairman of the Organising Committee of the Conference.

According to Al Harthy the conference will tackle a variety of topics including transformation of HR for tomorrow, future of workplace and workspace, employee engagement in a digital space, diversity and inclusion, and employee wellbeing.

Most notably, the conference will conduct a workshop targeted at creating a national human resources strategy in collaboration with Oman Vision 2040 and the Ministry of Labour. **TO P14**

Omani startup prototypes graphene technology-based power-bank

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 22

An Omani startup has ambitions to commercialise the production of power-banks based on breakthrough solid-state graphene battery technology, in what promises to be a technological first for the Sultanate of Oman.

BRQ Advanced Technology (BRQ), which attracted national acclaim in 2020 for its localised production of phone chargers based on international specs, is now pioneering the development of an industrial power-bank based on cutting-edge battery technology – a futuristic product with the potential to put Oman on the global map.

"We are in a very early stage of prototyping a solid-state graphene battery power-bank with 30,000 mAh capacity and fast charging technology up to 100w (In/Out)," said Saud al Mukhaini, founder of BRQ.

Announcing the breakthrough in a post on social media last week, BRQ said the prototype represents a "scientific revolution" for Oman.

This is particularly so because the model in question is not only



The new battery technology is very advanced and will take a while for it to be manufactured widely, but the good news is that we can think of using this technology in our products and we believe it's a very futuristic milestone.

SAUD AL MUKHAINI
Founder, BRQ

slim and compact in size relative to conventional lithium-ion battery technology, but also a powerhouse in its own right.

CUTTING EDGE: LOCAL INNOVATOR SEES POTENTIAL FOR MASS PRODUCTION OF NEW INDUSTRIAL POWER-BANK PRODUCT BASED ON BREAKTHROUGH BATTERY TECHNOLOGY

In remarks to the *Observer*, Al Mukhaini underlined the potential for mass production once the prototype is suitably finetuned to make it commercial.

"The new battery technology is very advanced and will take a while for it to be manufactured widely, but the good news is that we can think of using this technology in our products and we believe it's a very futuristic milestone. There are plans for mass production of the new power-bank but it is a long-range plan until the final prototypes (are developed)."

A graduate of Mechanical Engineering and Industrial Management, Saud began assembling small devices and gadgets in the safety of his 'home lab' in 2020 amid a sweeping lockdown across Oman and the

wider world in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak earlier that year.

One of his first innovations was a micro weather station, dubbed 'BRQ Micro', that he believes was the smallest of its kind in the world at the time.

That initial success inspired Saud to venture into the design and manufacture of charging products, several of which have since been introduced in the local and regional market.

The list includes: Wall Charging Adapter with PD 3.0 Technology, Car Charger with PD 3.0 Technology, a Type C to Type C cable, a Lightning to Type-C PD MFi Cable, a Wireless Magnetic charger, 130w 4 Ports GaN Technology charger, and also others.

Following the certification of his iPhone charging cable by Apple itself, Saud soon found himself enjoying the trust of local and regional consumers for his range of BRQ branded products.

Solid-state graphene battery technology is set to be a game-changer for the global market, says Saud.

Shell Oman to introduce first smart service stations concept in Oman

MUSCAT: Shell Oman Marketing Company SAOG (Shell Oman) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Amlaak Energy Resources Company (Amlaak), an Omani company, to launch unique smart service stations in the Sultanate of Oman.

This makes Shell Oman the first fuel marketing company in Oman to plan and implement these state-of-the-art modular service stations that promise to be safe, efficient, futuristic, and sustainable.

The MoU, marking a new phase in the local energy market, was signed recently by Dr Mohammed al Balushi, Chief Executive Officer of Shell Oman, and by Aarif al Jaffari, Managing Director of Amlaak Moving towards integrated, efficient and lower-carbon practices, the new smart service stations reflect Shell Oman's commitment to meeting customers' evolving needs and their urban lifestyle.

This solution is tailored to accelerate this transformation and promote intelligent sustainable development practices in the fuel marketing sector in Oman. While it enhances the efficiency in the overall value chain across the retail sector, it also reduces costs, waste, and the overall site carbon emissions.



The prefabricated service stations are easy to set up, economical and meet the requirements of the market that is increasingly shifting towards feasible and convenient options to deliver energy products and services to savvy customers.

Dr Mohammed al Balushi, said, "We are glad to be partnering with Omani entrepreneurs like Amlaak to work together in response to our customers' evolving needs and expectations, which is in line with our In-Country Value agenda.

Urban populations and cities are growing, so it is vital to make the right choices for a sustainable future. In addition, digital technology has transformed customer expectations around the convenience of retailing, speed,

and a seamless experience.

Working closely with different stakeholders such as the government, the private sector, and local communities, we aim to help move people and goods with lower emissions, switch to cleaner energy options and embed safe and sustainable features in their built environments and mobility solutions."

Having acquired exclusive GCC rights for this novel concept, Amlaak will collaborate with Oman Shell in setting smart service stations in the country.

Amlaak is one of the leading SME firms in the field of commercial fuel distribution, transportation of fuel, lubricants, and its other derivatives. Its operations include building modular service stations

in Oman with minimal civil work and equipped with solutions that increase efficiency and reduce carbon emissions.

Commenting on the partnership, Aarif al Jaffari said, "These new service stations adopt a modern design and are developed with sustainability, safety, and special efficiency in mind; standing at 1,000 m2 compared to the 3,000 m2 regular service stations.

In terms of power usage, the new smart service stations consume 63% less power, utilise solar power to consume 43% less electricity, and are equipped with a device to recycle fuel vapor on its first and second stages, deeming the stations completely free of fuel vapour, safe and environmentally efficient. Our goal here is efficiency and sustainability; hence we designed the new stations to be 89% mobile, and cost 42% less than the standard service station."

Khalid al Awaisi, General Manager of Mobility at Shell Oman, further noted that the objective behind the fast-paced modular design was to provide environmentally friendly solutions such as VRS (Vapor Recovery Systems) and solar energy for power. "These quick operating modular stations are equipped with technology integration, application and digitisation."

Ford launches first-ever powerful & tough Ranger Raptor in Oman



MUSCAT: Ford Oman recently launched the most anticipated tough and desirable Ranger Raptor in Oman. The next-generation and next-level Ford Ranger Raptor is built to conquer every terrain.

The Ranger Raptor boldly raises the bar on off-road performance making it a pure performance pick-up truck for true enthusiasts.

The Ranger Raptor sports an all-new look that builds on Next-Gen Ranger's bold, strong style. Flared wheel arches and C-clamp headlight designs emphasise the pick-up's width, while bold F-O-R-D lettering on the grille and the tough separate bumper add more visual muscle.

The matrix LED headlights with LED daytime running lights push Ranger Raptor's lighting performance to new levels, featuring predictive curve lights, glare-free high beam and auto dynamic levelling to deliver better visibility for Ranger Raptor drivers and other road users.

The flared fenders cover muscular 17-inch alloy wheels wrapped in Raptor-exclusive performance all-terrain tyres.

Functional vents, aero features and tough, grippy cast-aluminium side steps

help enhance the look and functionality of the truck.

At the rear, LED taillights provide a signature styling link to the front, while the Precision Grey rear bumper features an integrated step pad and towbar that is tucked up high to avoid compromising the departure angle. Inside, the theme continues to emphasise Ranger Raptor's off-road performance and high-energy nature.

The cabin features all-new, jet fighter-inspired sports seats in the front and rear to increase comfort and offer more support during high-speed cornering. The Code Orange accents on the instrument panel, trim and seats are mirrored by Ranger Raptor's ambient lighting.

Those interested in experiencing the all-new Ranger Raptor can visit their nearest Ford showroom.

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Forum to discuss new National Human Resources Strategy

FROM PAGE 13

Director General of Training at the Ministry of Labour, Dr Muhammad al Najjar, shared the following, "The cooperation between the Ministry of Labour and OSHRM stems from our

belief that this association can aid in achieving our goal of developing our national human resources strategy."

"The human resources field is integrated with all sectors, economic development is not possible without paying close

attention to the HR sector. It is the most important factor in all the sectors, especially in the Sultanate of Oman.

While we are trying to achieve our 2040 vision, this is the sector we need to pay attention to," he added.

According to organisers, more than 57 local and global speakers will participate in the event.

The conference will also include an exhibition and an award ceremony to honour outstanding individuals and entities in the field.

Huawei announces release of newest entry-level tablet

MUSCAT: Huawei Consumer Business Group announced yesterday the release of its newest entry-level tablet. The Huawei MatePad SE 10.4-inch, a versatile tablet designed for household use, and offers a treasure trove of new home entertainment capabilities.



The new-generation Huawei MatePad SE 10.4-inch is everything consumers have come to expect from a tablet, giving users the freedom to watch and browse with ease. Notably, the Huawei MatePad SE comes with a wealth of new online learning, e-book reading, and news browsing features, to meet the needs of the whole family.

The Huawei MatePad SE 10.4-inch comes equipped with a spacious 10.4-inch 2K Eye Comfort Huawei FullView Display, which has passed the TÜV Rheinland Low Blue Light and Flicker-free certifications for proven eye fatigue relief.

The 83% screen-to-body ratio provides for immersive viewing, and the airy-light 440 g body, features a robust middle frame ensuring durable usage. The tablet body has passed a series of stringent extrusion tests, and is more than equipped to handle the occasional mishaps encountered in daily life, such as accidental drops. New smart capabilities make the MatePad SE a Super Device that benefits every member of the family.

The Huawei MatePad SE is available in Oman a price of RO 71.9 from Huawei's online platforms, and Huawei Experience Stores in City Centre Muscat and Mall of Oman.

LuLu Financial Holdings, Eastnets hold special event in Davos

MUSCAT: As the world's leaders, social scientists and business community converge on this year's World Economic Forum (WEF) Annual Meeting, the key theme of 'Cooperation in a fragmented world', has resonated with stakeholders of MENA's financial services sector.

Building upon this message, UAE based LuLu Financial Holdings and Eastnets organised a special event around the role of fully compliant technologies in achieving financial inclusion.

Speaking at the event, Aadeb Ahamed, Managing Director of LuLu Financial Holdings, said that co-opetition, or competition through collaboration requires the collective action of all stakeholders, including governments, fintechs and traditional players.

He stressed on the role of fully compliant solutions in helping companies tap into each other's benefits, adding, "The foundation of interoperable solutions depends on fully compliant platforms that adhere to regulations and simplify processes for interconnected entities. The significance of such platforms is set to increase as



consumer behaviour undergoes further evolution and regulations are put in place to ensure proper data ownership."

The session also saw subject matter experts Hazem Mulhim, Founder and CEO of Eastnets, Christos Christou, Chief Compliance Officer of LuLu Financial Holdings and Joel Lange, General Manager of Dow Jones Risk & Compliance, discuss the role of compliance

in plugging gaps in financial services, especially cross-border remittances.

Christos said that the strategic role of compliant systems is gaining relevance, and that companies such as LuLu Financial Holdings are enabling platform-based services to fintechs and traditional players, that can bridge the gap between the underbanked and technologically advanced financial products.

Calling for inclusion to be responsible and sustainable, Eastnets deputy CEO Deya Innab said in her closing remarks, that access to digital financial services should create financial stability and not lead to a debt trap situation.

"Financial inclusion needs to be supported by consumer needs & financial education and should be guarded against fraud, data privacy issues and financial crime."

CMA reviews outcomes of anti-money laundering inspection work in 2022

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 22

As part of its endeavours to enhance combating money laundering and terrorism financing in the sectors regulated by the Capital Market Authority (CMA), the regulator hosted a meeting to review its performance during 2022.

It also discussed the risk assessment questionnaire for companies licensed by the CMA – an initiative overseen by Majid Mohammed al Kiyumi, Director of the Anti-Money Laundering & Combating Financing Terrorism Department.

The session was attended by compliance officers and the likes in the companies regulated by the CMA in the capital market and insurance sectors.

The session was held to review the key observations of the audit visits and to present the new questionnaire and data, in addition to clarifying some of the concepts included in the questionnaire, correcting some errors made by some companies in the previous



questionnaire further to obtaining more accurate information that reflects the operations and size of the company, answer companies' inquiries and highlight the deadline for the mutual assessment process by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

Based on the inspection data of the year 2022, the aspects that needed to be strengthened in the anti-money laundering and combating terrorism financing

process in companies were discussed.

The session focused on ensuring that the risk assessment report includes the risk factors and due diligence measures taken in accordance with the requirements stipulated in the instructions.

For example: the existence of detailed assessment of customer risks, geographical location, nature of products and services and risks of delivery channels.

The CMA also stressed the importance of including all data that must be available in the account opening form / insurance application form, as it was noted that some data are incomplete, and all identification documents of the client are not satisfied before opening the account.

Moreover, information that would enable determining the level and source of income were not obtained. The CMA pointed

out to the necessity of activating the role of the compliance officer by qualifying and training the compliance officers and granting them the powers stipulated in the instructions and enabling them to exercise their role, beside enhancing the awareness and knowledge of the compliance officer about the nature of suspicious transactions, reporting mechanism, and ensuring that the compliance officer is informed of the client's information and any information related to customer due diligence, transaction record and other relevant information.

It is worth noting that the session is part of series of programmes and workshops related to combating money laundering and terrorism financing implemented by the CMA represented by the Anti-Money Laundering and Combating Financing Terrorism Department in cooperation with various entities and experts in the field, which comes to achieve the awareness role of the regulated institutions in addition to its legislative role.

Omani startup prototypes graphene technology-based power-bank

FROM PAGE 13

"Solid-state graphene offers more energy density to volume, which can help to reduce battery size. And it's also a very safe battery - the risk of explosion is very limited even under rough conditions like (bending, crushing, or even drilling through the battery). It's a very safe alternative to Li-Ion batteries."

For now, the Omani inventor is dependent entirely on his own modest resources and funding to get his brainchild venture through to the commercial development phase. But as the uptake of the new technology picks up pace globally, Saud sees

the potential for the production of around 3,000 industrial power-banks per year to cater to the local and regional market.

Sharing a rough timeline to achieve commercialisation, he added: "After the final prototyping stage, there will be a long-term testing stage and this will take time for sure, then we can go for the mass production stage. And this process usually takes up to two years, especially when it comes to new technologies."

An ardent innovator, Saud believes that his work in the field of consumer electronics will contribute to the development of this key sector.

Sohar Port and Freezone launches emergency response outfit

BUSINESS REPORTER

SUHAR, JAN 22

To elevate emergency preparedness and response, including firefighting services, for all SOHAR facilities and tenants, SOHAR Port and Freezone has launched Sohar Emergency Response Organisation. A signing ceremony was organised to mark this milestone under the patronage of Eng Khamis bin Mohammed al Shamakhi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology for Transport.

"Ports play an important role not only as national economic drivers, but also serve as business and trade hubs in line with the Oman Vision 2040, which



prioritises logistics as one of the most important pillars," said Al Shamakh. "SOHAR Port and Freezone's investment in high-quality emergency preparedness and response will help safeguard the continuity of port operations thereby protecting the safety and vital interests of port users and Oman's logistics chain." The signing was also attended

by representatives from Unity Fire and Safety Services LLC, a key local provider of firefighting and emergency response services that will manage Sohar Emergency Response Organisation, representatives of the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA) and OQ, which will provide assistance during large scale incidents.

Marafiq signs MoU with Siemens Energy

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 22

Centralised Utilities Company LLC (Marafiq), a joint venture owned by OQ and Gulf Energy Development Corporation of Thailand, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Siemens Energy LLC, to cooperate in the fields of innovation in the energy and water sectors.

The MoU provides opportunities to work on advanced technologies, research & development and accelerate the local, Omani capabilities and knowledge in line with Oman Vision 2040.

Marafiq and Siemens Energy have a Long-Term Services Agreement (25 years) for the gas turbines and this MoU will expand the cooperation, emphasise the long-term relationship and maintain the ongoing mutual collaboration.



The MoU was signed by Eng Abdullah bin Mohammed al Hashimi, Managing Director of Marafiq, and Khalid Bin Hadi, Managing Director, Oman, Siemens Energy.

At the signing ceremony, Eng Abdullah al Hashimi pointed out that the MoU is in line with Marafiq's efforts to collaborate with internationally renowned

companies and benefit from their expertise in the energy and water sectors. It further provides professional training opportunities for Omanis in international companies that are specialised in the sectors in which Marafiq operates.

"We value our collaboration with Siemens Energy, and we look forward to the memorandum's

contribution to creating wide-ranging cooperation between both parties", Al Hashimi commented.

It is worth noting that Marafiq manages the power and water sectors in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) under a long-term agreement with OPAZ and enjoys the capability to produce power exceeding 400 megawatts to serve Duqm Refinery, Oil Storage Park in Ras Markaz, industrial, commercial and tourism projects, and residential properties in the Zone.

Moreover, Marafiq operates a potable water desalination plant with production capacity of up to 9,000 cubic metres per day. Marafiq also provides industrial cooling water for Duqm Refinery and has the capacity to provide for future industrial projects at SEZAD through an industrial water desalination plant with a capacity of 36,000 cubic metres per day.

Furthermore, Marafiq operates seawater intake facilities with a supply capacity of 1.5 million cubic metres per day and a water outtake line with a capacity of 1 million cubic metres per day.

On the other hand, Khalid Bin Hadi commended on the collaboration between the two companies, saying "As a world leading energy technology, innovation sits at the heart of our company's success. But innovation requires strong partners, collaboration and research and development.

Agreements like this pave the way for significant progress. We look forward to working with Marafiq to explore opportunities in the field of power, develop local Omani capabilities, further knowledge sharing and cooperate in other aspects of interest to both companies that will contribute to the economic development of Oman."

Orientation session provides overview on equity investments

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 22

An orientation session on stock market investments, held recently at Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX), attracted a number of finance and accounting professionals, equity analysts and aspiring investors.

Speaking at the event, A V Manohar, CEO — Wisdom Business and Training Services, said the secret of success in investment is to be "system-oriented, strategy-driven and smart-in-action".

Esponsing the importance of saving, the veteran financial professional noted: "Investment is a wonderful journey and if one steps in at a young age, through compulsory savings every month, he can reach the higher portals of wealth early in life. A great chance of compounding one's savings through a fabulous multiplier effect is awaited in this game of skills.

'Make money out of money' is the narrative that comes out in this exciting endeavour. Stock returns as a hedge against inflation are another advantage."

Stock market investment is not as risky as thought to be by many, provided the investor keeps investments in fundamentally good scrips and decides to hold them for a long term, he said.

"Buy Right; Sit Tight" is the wise advice from equity winners. Researching on fundamentals of the company before investing, arriving at the intrinsic value of the stock, operating with stop-loss and exiting at the appropriate time are the SOPs for making money in stock market," Manohar pointed out.

Exhorting his audience to invest from their savings and not through borrowings, he also frowned upon "reckless investing" driven by greed, fear and the herd mentality.

The attendees were guided through different aspects of investment such as Equity Shares, Stock Market, Research on Economy, Sector and Fundamentals of the chosen company, Intrinsic Valuation of the stock, Fixing the Target Return, Buy & Sell Strategy, Investment Plan and Philosophy. Besides, a touch-up on Technical Analysis, Mutual Funds, Unlisted Companies and Bonds.

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Memories of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar's Al Dawa cave

Thanks to a tip from a patient, this adventurer learned about the interesting small cave found in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar the local people called Al Dawa named after the white powder collected in the past by the locals at the mouth of the cave as a treatment to some skin diseases... **P20**

Sufi Music Festival encourages cultural vitality

AS PART OF its celebrations of the Silver Jubilee, Bait Al Zubair Foundation is organising Bait Al Zubair Sufi Music Festival (second edition) over three nights. The theatre of Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Resort will host the festival from January 23-25 and three bands from inside and outside Oman. The bands will sing poems by great poets such as Ibn Al Farid, Rabia Al Adawiya, and Shaikh Jaed al Kharousi, accompanied by a professional performance individually and collectively.

The festival will host Sheikh Hamed Dawood Group on the first day whose

works are basically related to classical Sufi poets, especially inspired by the famous Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi. The group contains prestigious artists with long professional careers and with the experience of numerous performances in different parts of the world, performing one of the most captivating aspects of Syrian's traditional arts with a spiritual musical atmosphere that leads to entering the universe of mystical art.

While the second day, the Omani Zawiyah Band will perform, which is a band concerned with mystical and humanistic music. The band was



founded in 2015 and has local and Arab participation, including the Fez International Festival of Spiritual



Music in Morocco. The well-known Tanzanian artist, Yahya Baihaqi Hussain, is participating with the band, where he

is one of the performers of supplications known for their many participations at the Arab and international levels.

The festival nights will be concluded with the Egyptian band, Al Hadrah for Sufi music. It is a singing group that aims to transfer the heritage of Egyptian Sufi societies to theatres, in an artistic manner preserving the most significant components of the Egyptian popular religious heritage.

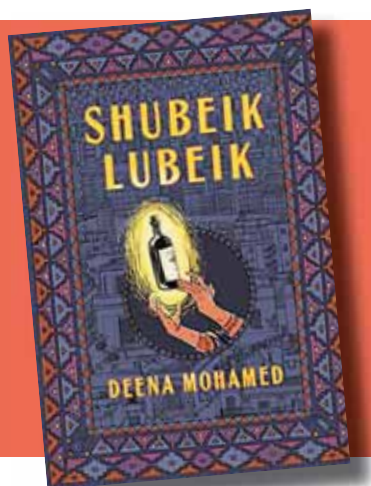
This edition of the festival comes after the success of the first edition of the Festival of Sufi Music, which hosted Ibn Arabi Band from Morocco, Farid Ayaz Band from Pakistan, Salar Aqili Band from Iran, and Al Zawiya Band from the Sultanate of Oman. In its first edition, the festival received wide praise from fans of Sufi music.

It is worth noting that this festival is available to attend free of charge, and it comes in partnership with the Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Resort, Oman Air, Zubair Automotive, Zeenah, Photo Center, and Oman Oasis. This partnership comes to emphasise the role played by various parties for the vitality of cultural action. In addition to expanding the horizon of its coordinates, which expects partnership and systemic cooperation that lead to new and diverse extensions in cultural content that serve the aspirations of those interested and the current trends of cultural discourse.

READ

SHUBEIK LUBEIK BY DEENA MOHAMED

A brilliantly original debut graphic novel that imagines a fantastical alternate Cairo where wishes really do come true. Shubeik Lubeik—a fairy tale rhyme means “your wish is my command” in Arabic.



SPECIES

Thai marine conservation officials have used thermal imaging equipment mounted on a drone to capture footage of a leatherback sea turtle, the world's largest turtle species, coming to shore to lay eggs

—Reuters



TRADITIONS

Traditional lion dancers perform in the Chinatown area of Bangkok on January 22, 2023, on the first day of the Lunar New Year of the Rabbit.

—AFP





Shakespeare in Yemen

TO BE, OR NOT to be": on a stage in Yemen, William Shakespeare's "Hamlet" rings out in Arabic, a tragedy that resonates with an audience suffering from years of civil war.

In the government-controlled city of Aden, battered by the conflict, the first performance of a Shakespeare play in many years has resurrected hopes of a cultural revival.

"We are hungry for these kinds of events," said Heba al-Bakri, watching one of a sold-out run of 10 shows. "Our people are always distressed and exhausted, so we need this kind of entertainment."

As the actors took their bows, applause roared out and the audience rose for a standing ovation.

The savage bloodshed, murder, revenge, power struggles and moral dilemmas told in the famous tragedy by the English playwright were written over 400 years ago — but on stage in Yemen today, the play holds power.

Yemen, the poorest country on the Arabian peninsula, has been at war since 2014 when Iran-backed Huthi rebels seized the capital Sanaa, prompting a Saudi-led coalition to intervene the following year.

The country has been left in ruins, hundreds of thousands of people have died, and many more have been pushed to the brink of famine.

DREAM REALISED

Director Amr Gamal, founder of the Khaleej Aden Theatre Troupe, feared there might have been only "limited interest", but is now planning a second round of shows after its success.

The three-hour performance has gripped the audience.

"They do not leave the room before the play ends", said Gamal, who also directed the feature film "Ten Days Before the Wedding", a love story which Yemen named as their official submission to the 2018 Oscars.

Yemen, renowned for its rich cultural heritage, has a long history of performing Shakespeare in Arabic dating back over a century.

In this version, "Hamlet" was



translated first into classical Arabic and then into Aden's dialect to provide it with a unique Yemeni twist.

Including characters wearing traditional Yemeni dress, it has turned a centuries-old tale into a platform to reflect on the troubled times in the country today.

"It is an old dream realised after years of work", said assistant director Marwan Mafrag, noting the "lack of resources" in Yemen had led to a "very tight space" for artistic production.

Backed by the British Council, a cultural and educational organisation, the play is being performed in a former government building dating to when the southern port city was a British colony.

For the past two years, the cast in Aden received support via video-

link from Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London and the Volcano Theatre in Wales.

The British Council said the "Hamlet" production showed its commitment to "building the capacity of young Yemenis to creatively express themselves".

SOW LOVE AND PEACE

But putting on the play posed not only logistical challenges.

Nour Zaker, who plays the tragic character of Ophelia, said she had to both learn a challenging role on stage and overcome social taboos against female actors in the conservative country.

"I faced many difficulties as a woman in Aden," she said.

"My family did not object, but it was difficult because... society does

not easily accept these things."

But her audience — which included women wearing the face-covering niqab veil, common in Yemen — were receptive.

For those watching and those on stage, the hope is "Hamlet" may help start a wider revival.

"As artists, we always have the hope that there will be great cultural productions, theatrical or cinematographic, which highlight Yemeni culture," said actor Omar Majalad, who plays Hamlet's friend Guildenstern.

"We hope that there will be more attention given to art and music," said university student Fadi Abdulmalik, after watching a performance.

"This will sow love and peace in Yemen." — **AFP**

ENTERTAINMENT

Funny old world: The week's offbeat news



From the world's biggest Messi tattoo to the life-saving tomato ketchup diet...

MESSI CLEANS UP

An Argentine farmer has used a hi-tech tractor to create a giant "tattoo" of the face of football legend Lionel Messi.

Charly Faricelli used special software to plant the corn seeds in different concentrations in a field the size of four football pitches in Ballesteros, northwest of Buenos Aires.

"The idea was a tribute to Messi," said Faricelli, "whether he won the World Cup or not — which thank God he did".

Messi's popularity knows no bounds, with figurines of the former Barcelona star also Catalonia's bestselling "caganer" this year. The cheeky traditional statuettes depict bare-bottomed public figures relieving themselves.

Barcelona-based Argentinian student Kevin Sakkal said his chest filled with pride to see so many squatting Messi on the shelves.

"It is a great honour that they represent us like this, even if he is shitting," he said-

PRIDE BEFORE A FALL

It's nice to be important but it's more important to be nice, as a Hong Kong gangster found to his cost.

A video of him getting out of his Porsche to insult and swing at a minibus driver in a road rage incident went viral, his threats all the more chilling as he claimed to be a member of a triad.

But his bravado led to his undoing. Police used the video to track him down and seize 1.7 kilograms (three pounds 11 ounces) of what is thought to be cocaine.

WINGED MUSK SELLS THE BIRD



Our hearts go out to Elon Musk, who has just become the first person ever to lose \$200 billion.

Things are so bad that he is having to sell the coffee machines and the plant pots at Twitter, where he has already sacked half the staff.

But as his wealth took a record-breaking hit from Tesla's plunging share price, there was a glimmer of light for the world's second richest man.

A neon sign of the Twitter bird went for \$40,000 at an auction of furniture and equipment from the tech firm's San Francisco headquarters.

SAVED BY THE SAUCE

In a blow to parents everywhere, a man lost at sea said he survived for 24 days by eating ketchup.

Elvis Francois from the Caribbean island of Dominica found himself adrift when the weather turned foul while he was repairing a sailing boat.

"I had no food. There was only a bottle of ketchup", garlic powder and some stock cubes, said Francois.

"It was very rough. I don't know how I am alive today but I am alive. And I am grateful for that," he added.

He was eventually rescued by the Colombian navy and is thought to be in rude good health.

Francois can't wait to ketchup with his relieved family. As the Heinz ad says, "The best things come to those who wait." — **AFP**



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AROUND THE WORLD

ROYAL FAMILY

Processions, lunches and concert to crown King Charles III



THE CORONATION WEEKEND for King Charles III will feature a star-studded concert, nationwide "big lunch" and volunteering initiative as well as the traditional ceremony and royal processions, Buckingham Palace announced late Saturday.

The three days of ceremonial, celebratory and community events in early May will be a chance for "people to come together in celebration of the historic occasion", the palace said in an update on its much-anticipated plans.

The landmark long weekend looms with the monarchy still grappling with the fallout from the publication earlier this month of Prince Harry's scorching tell-all memoir "Spare", in which he made a series of incendiary claims against the family.

It is unclear whether US-based Harry — Charles' younger son — and his American wife Meghan will attend the coronation, with a recent *Sunday Times* report claiming a reconciliation could still take place prior.

Charles, 74, immediately became king when Queen Elizabeth died aged 96 on September 8 last year, ending her record-breaking 70-year reign after a year of declining health.

He also took over as head of state of 14 Commonwealth countries, including Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

The coronation traditionally takes place some months after a new sovereign has ascended to the throne, following a period of national and royal mourning as well as intense preparation.

PROCESSIONS

The country's first coronation since 1953, set to be watched worldwide and feature various global dignitaries, will begin with Charles' formal crowning at London's Westminster Abbey on Saturday May 6, in a tradition dating back more than 900 years.

Buckingham Palace has previously said the service, to be conducted by Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, will reflect the monarchy's historic traditions alongside its modern role.

"The Coronation is a solemn religious service, as well as an occasion for celebration and pageantry," it noted.

Charles' wife, Queen Consort Camilla, 75, will also be crowned.

The pair will arrive from the palace without other royals in "The King's Procession", before returning in a larger ceremonial entourage known as "The Coronation Procession" featuring other family members.

Once back at the palace, the opening day will conclude with the royals appearing on the balcony overlooking The Mall where thousands of people are expected to gather.

SPECIAL/ CONCERT

The next day will then see a "special coronation concert" staged at Windsor Castle, west of London, to be produced and broadcast live by the BBC and featuring "global music icons and contemporary stars".

Several thousand pairs of tickets will be made available through a public ballot, while volunteers from charities supported by Charles and Camilla will also be able to attend — **AFP**

LOCAL SCENE

Youngsters prove their mettle by praying and winning



By Lakshmi Kothaneth

Are you still in school and do you perform your Fajr prayers regularly and the daily five prayers?

A mosque in Maabela asked this question and gave the opportunity to the youngsters to prove themselves.

The Musab bin Omar Mosque in Maabela has been recognising dedicated children who have been showing their commitment by regularly performing their prayers at the mosque.

Ahmad bin Salem al Fori, Imam of Musab bin Omar Mosque came up with the idea to encourage people to return back to mosques to pray after the Covid 19 lockdown.

The lockdown did bring changes in habits.

"We started first with the students at this mosque. We sent a google link to all the community members to participate in the sixty day competition. The competition began in November 2022. The registration was for two weeks but the competition was for 60 days."

Each day gains a point but the individual has to complete all the five prayers to gain a point each day. If one were to miss even one out of the daily prayer, the could lose that day's point. Twenty seven children came forward to take up the challenge.

"Most of the students secured 80 per cent and some of them less than 50 per cent. After the duration of the competition the participants were divided into four groups

level one — 85 to 100, level two 75 to 85, level three — 55 to 75 and level four was less than 55. We decided to buy bicycles because children love cycles and wanted to give something unusual that also promotes health," he pointed

the story and within hours netizens liked and shared. With more than 135k and counting, many commented on how they wanted to conduct this competition in their community mosques.

On January 16 the students



received their cycles. Shaikh Zahir bin Abdullah al Abry, member of the State Council was the guest of honour. The children who could not win cycles have received cash award.

"What was encouraging was people who were not regular to mosque also began to come daily because they were accompanying their children. When the participants received their gifts both the parents were there to see their children's success. The mothers now want the competition to continue because they have witnessed the benefits," noted the imam.

The community and the private sector came together to organise the gifts for the children.

CHANGING WORLD

'Aquaman' warns Sundance of deep-sea mining peril



HE IS BEST KNOWN as hunky, sea-dwelling superhero "Aquaman," but actor Jason Momoa brought a stark and sober warning about the perils of deep-sea mining to the Sundance film festival on Friday.

The Hawaiian-born A-lister narrates "Deep Rising," a new documentary about the frenzied efforts by resource-hungry corporations to scrape valuable metals from vast swathes of the Pacific floor.

Supporters of deep-sea mining claim that pellets of nickel and cobalt — used in electric car batteries — can be conveniently scooped off the seabed, helping reduce our fossil fuel reliance.

But conservation groups and scientists fear this could devastate poorly understood marine systems that play a crucial role in regulating the climate, and some nations have called for bans.

"There's moments where I cried and got emotional" narrating the film, Momoa told AFP, before its world premiere at the festival in Utah.

"It's very important, using your power for good. It's all the things I'm passionate about," added the actor, who took marine biology courses as a student, and is a UN Environment Program advocate for the oceans.

The documentary follows key players in the fledgling industry including The Metals Company, a Canadian group pushing to mine the Clarion Clipperton Zone — a vast expanse of seafloor near Hawaii.

The film goes behind-the-scenes as its chief executive Gerard Barron courts wealthy investors with promises that little harm will be done to "the most barren, desolate part of the planet," in contrast to the devastation that ongoing mining is causing rainforests.

But "Deep Rising" director Matthieu Rytz told AFP that "we know so little" about the real risk to the deep ocean.

"Extraction on the seafloor, it's just a rush, because we don't have enough science to really understand what's happening there," he said.

'THE NEW OIL'

Still, The Metals Company has said it expects to be mining 10 million tonnes of material from the ocean floor every year, starting in 2025.

And it is just one of about 20 research institutes or corporations that hold ocean exploration contracts, awaiting the go-ahead to begin commercial-scale mining.

Rytz's film argues that the energy crisis has no "silver bullet," and that the brewing race to harvest critical metals is not a solution but "the new oil," and could trigger future resource wars.

It shows meetings of the International Seabed Authority, described by Rytz as an "obscure room in Kingston, Jamaica" where delegates decide "the future of 65 per cent of the planet's surface."

"This is beyond national jurisdiction. It's the high seas," said Rytz.

"It belongs to all of us or none of us."

Rytz speaks in the film with scientists who argue that alternative clean, more abundant energy sources such as hydrogen should be explored for car engines, or that transport options such as high-speed rail should be expanded. — **AFP**

art & life

Local Scene

f t i y l p @omanobserver

MONDAY | JANUARY 23 | 2023

Memories of Al Jabal Al Akhhdhar's Al Dawa cave

By Khaled Abdul Malak

It was thanks to a tip from one of my patients, Adil bin Saleh al Zakwani, that I had the chance to visit a little-known cave in Wadi Al Mueidin in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar that local people call "Al Dawa" cave.

Driven by curiosity and my passion for discovery I decided to check out this cave with my wife, Marta. It was on September 20, 2012.

Around an hour and a half drive from Muscat, we took the rough road in Wadi Al Mueidin on the left at 22° 56.972'N 57° 40.291'E. We continued straight ahead and took the right at 22° 59.335'N 57°40.291'E, then drove in the wadi till the end of the track.

From there we walked in the wadi for around one kilometre until we reached the place where the climb starts on the right of the wadi uphill towards the entrance of the cave.

At this point, we were joined by Adil's brother, Jamal bin Saleh al Zakwani, and his cousin, Mohamed bin Khamis al Zakwani, who offered to guide us to the cavern.

It was a hot day and our progression in the wadi was quite difficult.

After 75 minutes of bouldering in the bed of the canyon, we started climbing up a very steep slope on the left bank of the wadi, where the terrain was very unstable with loose rocks. The hike was very tough and unpleasant because of the stones rolling under our steps!

It took us another 30 minutes to reach a place where an exposed traverse made Marta and Mohamed stop. Jamal and I went further to reach the entrance of the cave 20 minutes from there. The hole in the mountain is not more than 5m wide and 1m high.

After a few metres inside the cave, we saw stone structures built by humans and then proceeded inside a tunnel. For approximately 100m, the distance between the lateral walls didn't exceed 4m and the ceiling was so low that in some places we had to crawl to move forward. We came across lots of bats that looked disturbed and scared by our presence. In some places, we found bat skeletons on the floor.

The more we progressed, the more the air became rare and the humidity was very high which made it harder for us to breathe. We lost plenty of water in sweat as the temperature was quite high.

In some places, we had to squeeze ourselves between the ceiling and the floor to progress in the narrow tube. Jamal told me that sometimes after heavy rains the tunnel is flooded and one could get stuck inside.

After walking, climbing and crawling for some 40 minutes, we decided to stop our exploration at a place where the roof of the chamber reached a height of around 10 metres. The place was very pretty and decorated with different kinds of calcite formations: stalactites and stalagmites intersect in some places forming what we call columns. Some of the formations were still growing and we saw water droplets dripping from their tip.

Jamal told me that back in the day, people used to collect white powder at the entrance of the cave and used it as a medicine, or dawa in Arabic, from which the cave's name was derived, to treat some skin diseases (probably eczema).

After taking pictures of the cave's interior, we returned to the wadi where Marta and Mohamed had been waiting for us. We then drove to Birkat al Mawz to drop off our friends who insisted on offering us a bag of dates collected in their gardens and continued to Al Jabal Al Akhdhar where Marta and I spent the night looking forward to another exploration adventure in the mountain the next day.

